

# SYNERGY

Volume 4:No.4

Exploring the Boundaries of Cinema and Entertainment



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**Volume 4 No.4**  
From Anime to Superheroes

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# SYNERGY

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Synergy Magazine reviews DVDs from all regions. The **R** description with each title advises the Region.

1 = USA  
2 = UK  
3 = Asia  
4 = Australia  
0 = All region.

### DVD-R

DVD-R refers to titles which have not been formally released on DVD but release via specialty DVD firms.

NTSC or PAL is used with the ALL REGION CODE and refers to the TV format.

### Blu Ray

We review Blu Rays from all regions; we will clearly list the region (or region free) on each disc. The best reference site for Blu Ray is <http://www.blu-ray.com>. It includes lots of details about Blu Ray releases and is one of the only reliable sources for information on which Blu Ray releases are ALL REGION. If you re-

quire an ALL region DVD and Blu-ray player, we recommend you look at the Kogan Blu-ray player (<http://www.kogan.com.au>)

For Adult titles, we include an extra reference **(E)** for explicit, **(M)** for mature. Adult content within mainstream titles will be mentioned as appropriate.

DD refers to Digital Download with the format of the download following in brackets.

### Publication Details

#### Print and Digital Editions

Six issues a year.

#### Online

Daily Updates

#### Website

<http://www.synergy-magazine.com>

The print and digital edition of Synergy is published six times a year and includes reviews from the website from the preceding period expanded content, articles and features research, news, added images, screen shorts and competitions.

Features, articles, news and competitions only appear in the digital and print editions.

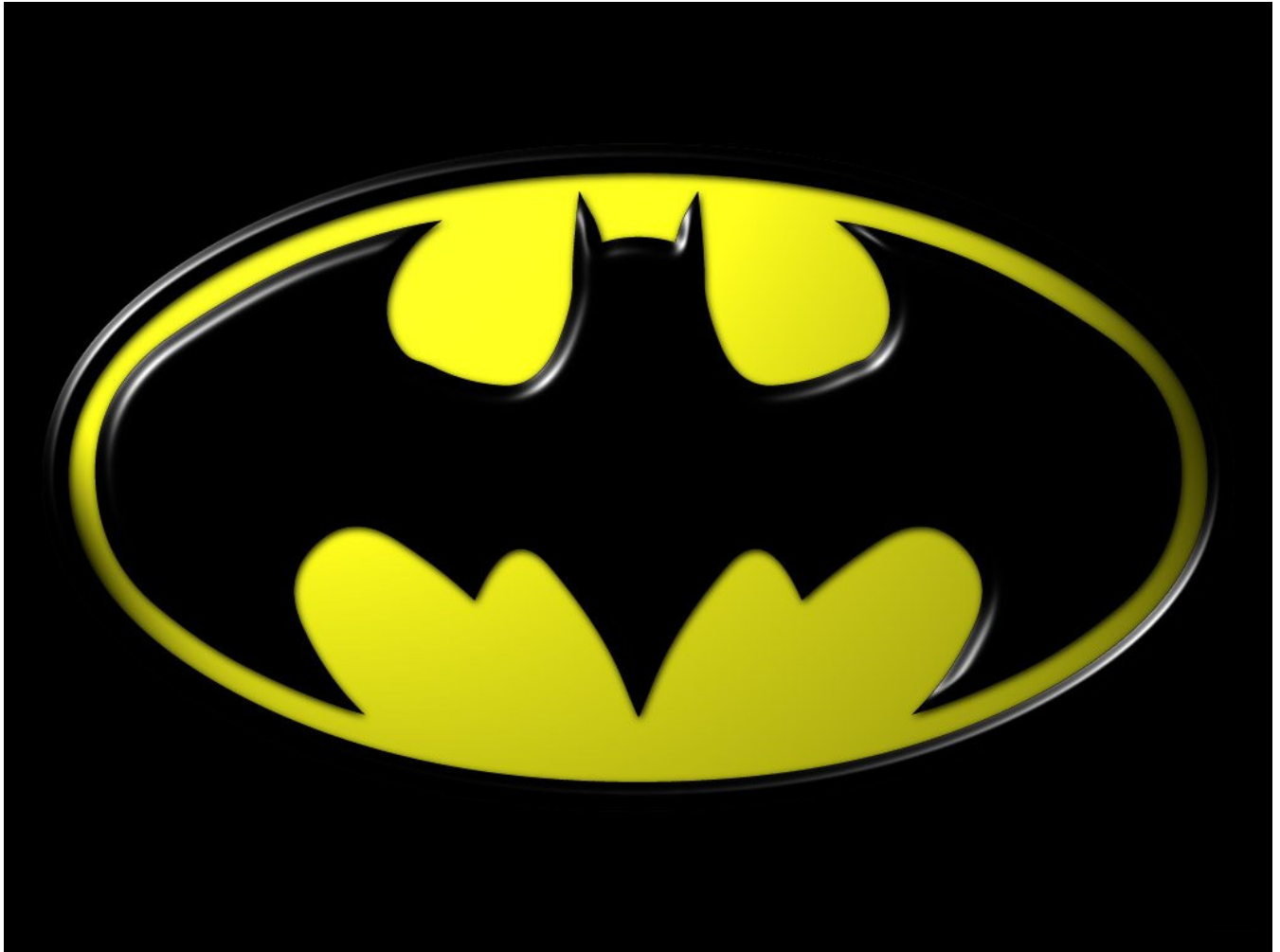
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### Welcome to Synergy

From Anime to Superheroes is another challenging, interesting and exciting issue from Synergy.

Packed with features covering unusual subjects such as the films of Philip.K. Dick and the strange superheroes of Alan Moore to a history of Superheroes. We also have an extensive history of Anime.

Our articles are more extensive this issue and we are sure you will find them informative and entertaining. Of course we have now skimmed on the reviews and there are lots of them as well !



Our book section is expanding and we run an interview with Kevin Hearne, the author of Hexed.

This, we hope, will be the first of many interviews with authors, film producers and directors.

Our next issue is on Horror but with the normal Synergy twist. We will examine current trends in horror, current issues relating to violence and its history within the horror genre, horror remakes and examine the "Dexter" phenomenon.

**Editors  
Synergy**



### **Mythbusters Season 5 With Special Edition T-Shirt Magna (Australia)**

*Mythbusters* is a unique series investigating the bizarre claims of urban legends and modern misconceptions. Melding popular culture with scientific fact this series doesn't just retell the stories... it puts them to the test!

Adam Savage Jamie Hyneman Kari Byron Tory Bellici and Grant Imahara return for a fifth season of *Mythbusters*.

Over the previous series the *Mythbusters* team have tested 532 myths destroyed 60 cars and detonated more than six tonnes of explosives and for this series they are going to keep the records rolling.

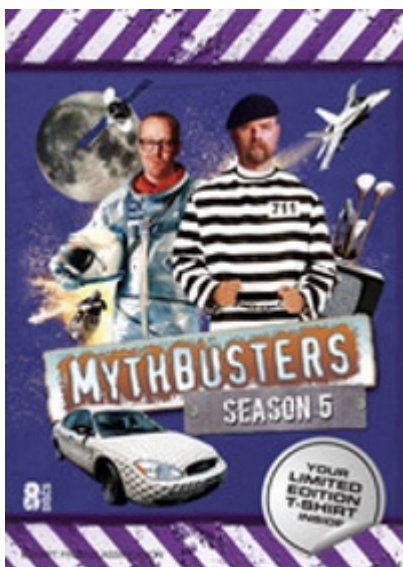
After over 140 hours of television you'd think that there might not be too many more urban legends left to bust but in fact the opposite has proved to be the case. A strong fan base has helped with hundreds of new ideas and insured that each series is even more varied unpredictable and exciting than the last

Magna have given us two copies to giveaway and we are pleased to offer them in association with this issue.

If you want a chance to win send an email to [promotions@synergy-magazine.com](mailto:promotions@synergy-magazine.com) with *Mythbusters 5* in the subject.

Please include your name and postal address in the body of the email.

This competition is open to Australian residents only.



### **March of the Dinosaurs Fremantle Media Roadshow**

70 million years ago the tropical jungles of the North Pole thundered with the footfalls of hundreds of dinosaurs. This epic sight heralded the start of an annual ordeal as dinosaurs came together in huge numbers to escape the perils of a dramatic seasonal change. This incredible story is seen through the eyes of one of the most vulnerable members of the herd a young edmontosaurus undertaking his first 1000-mile migration south.

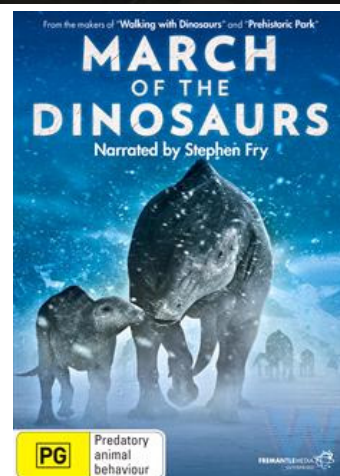
He has to survive the treacherous and punishing volcanic landscapes blizzards landslides droughts and the deadly predators who lie in wait along the route. Superbly narrated by Stephen Fry it takes the *Walking With Dinosaurs* series to the next level.

Roadshow have given us three copies to giveaway and we are pleased to offer them in association with this issue.

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Alan Moore (born 1953) is an English writer primarily known for his work in comics and graphic novels; he has produced some highly acclaimed series including *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*. He is a highly eccentric figure and generally avoids the limelight. He was thrown out of school in the 1970s for drug use and distribution and started out writing for British underground and alternative zines. He went through various dead end jobs including cleaning toilets and working in a tannery and these experiences give his work a grim and sometimes even misanthropic feel. His fantasy and fiction is marked by a great sense of realism in regards to everyday life but a powerful vision of alternative realities and man's potential, if only he would realize it.

He has a strong sense of personal ethics and empathises with sexual minorities. When producing *Maxwell the Magic Cat* for the *Northants Post*, under the pseudonym of Jill de Ray, he ended his association with the newspaper after it ran a negative piece on gays in the community. He decided to create more original work and achieved success working with such magazines as *2000AD* and *Warrior*. He went on to work

with American DC Comics developing a new take on old classics such as *Batman*, *Superman* and the *Swamp Thing*. While he helped bring comics "in from the cold" and developing the concept of the graphic novel he demanded a high level of independence and was difficult to work with regularly clashing with the editors of such larger companies.



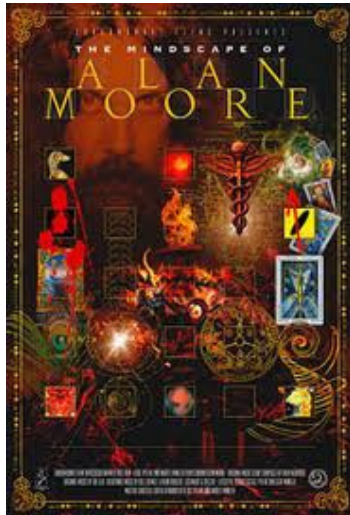
He went through stages of cooperating with mainstream companies and working independently. In the Eighties and Nineties he produces a range of unusual works include the explicit adult title *Lost Girls* as he believed erotica did not have to be unintelligent and could be exciting

as well as having a storyline. He also developed *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and the esoteric themed *Promethea*.

He started to work more independently publishing through *Top Shelf Comics* and releasing less mainstream content including *Dodgem Logic*, an indie magazine exploring art and ideas and a horror series called *Neonomicon* based on the *Cthulhu Mythos* (which was released through *Avatar Press*)



A documentary on Alan Moore has been released by Disinformation (USA) called *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*. It is a fascinating review of his work and worldview primarily composed on an extensive interview. Moore is a pagan and occultist and hence sees the world very different from other authors and artists, this is quite clearly seen in his comics, graphic novels and the film adaptations of his work. He is a follower of Aleister Crowley and practises ritual magic and this especially comes across in his more recent works and multimedia presentations.



A reoccurring theme in his work especially seen on screen in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) and *Watchmen* (2009) is the nature of the superhero. The concept of the hero, superman or Overman is central to much philosophical and occult thought. From Friedrich Nietzsche and his *Übermensch* (Overman) to the ideal of the self-realized magician this idea is central to a wide range of literary forms from fiction to film. Of course such an ideal was corrupted by the Third Reich and became the basis for their breeding program trying to perfect the ultimate man and Moore suggests this in *V for Vendetta* (2005) and to a lesser extent in *Watchmen* (2009). It seems that while man has much potential to become more than what he is, more often than not he wastes his potential in petty squabbles and meaningless indulgences, protecting his own interests to the detriment of the society and the environment.

Moore takes a unusual approach and explores the "all too human" side of the superhero. In *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) most of the characters have special abilities yet each are flawed in their own fashion. While in *Watchmen* (2009) all of the superheroes save one (perhaps two) are human and are simply using their own human ability matched with strange outfits to act like superheroes but at times seem more like vigilantes. It is fascinating to see how Moore explores the concept of



"becoming more than human" which is obviously central to his worldview. His other major themes are suppressive and controlling governments, the dangers of fundamentalism, the need for free expression and metaphysical themes.

### **From Hell (2001)**

*From Hell* is the most linear of the adaptations of Moore's work. It is set in 1888 and focuses on a detective investigating the grisly murders of a number of young girls. Loosely based on Jack the Ripper it has Inspector Fred Abberline using his psychic abilities to try and unravel the case. To trigger his abilities he uses a range of drugs from opium to absinthe and as these open his psyche to darker realms he finds himself not only getting closer to the truth but being drawn into the maelstrom which is causing the killings.







His investigations become more difficult as he uncovered links the aristocracy, the Freemasons and the medical profession covered by senior officers at Scotland Yard. The themes underlying this film include the use of drugs to trigger psychic abilities, the exploration of altered states of consciousness and the way in which the aristocracy protects its own even if involved in horrendous crimes.

### **The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (2003)**

I am reviewing the *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *Watchmen* in sequence as one is nearly a mirror reflection of the other when it comes to the idea of the superhero. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is, of course, primarily an action film, but it brings together motifs from a wide range of literary tales including *Dracula*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Nemo* (Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea), the *Invisible Man* and the *Picture of Dorian Gray*. These are



tied together in an overarching story about battling against a greater evil which threatens the world. However the primary theme is the nature of individual transformation, each character in one way or another, becomes a superhero through over the utilization of their unique skills. In many cases these skills are of a dubious nature but are disciplined and used for the greater good. This theme is emphasized throughout the film. The widow of Van Helsing, now a vampire, controls her "feeding habits" and uses them to fight the greater evil as does Dr. Hyde even if only after a bit of convincing. The pretty thieving skills of the Invisible Man are put on hold as he works as a spy to find out what is really happening and Nemo, once a pirate has been transformed into the Lord of the oceans through his worship of the goddess Kali. The anti-superhero is Dorian Gray, who having lived for an immense period of time becomes jaded and bitter thriving on manipulation and sensation rather than having gained a deeper appreciation of the human condition. This is a fascinating depiction of the model of the superhero as an individual who uses their own unique skills to better themselves. It reflects Moore's philosophical views reflected in the ancient Greeks who believed we all had





our own “genius” and within esotericism where anyone has the potential to become more than human through their own hard work if only they will make the effort.

### Watchmen (2009)

*Watchmen* is a very different superhero film, it is set in 1985 in an alternative history where Nixon is still President of the United States and where vigilantes dressed as superheroes are remembered for their role in controlling crime. As police forces failed, small groups of vigilante cops known as the Minutemen dressed as superheroes and took out the criminals – no courts or law, just immediate justice. The second generation became known as the Watchmen who solved crimes and despatched villains in an even more brutal fashion. However as they became more and more unruly wearing a superhero outfit was declared illegal and the superhero became the stuff of folklore.

A few superheroes remain working secretly for the government or as isolated individuals fighting crime. Only two of the Watchmen have ever gone public. The first is Ozymandias. He runs a large corporation and has used his notoriety to supposedly develop new forms of technology for the good of the world, he is a charismatic figure and has developed a huge following. He is viewed by suspicion by many of the other Watchmen. The other figure is Dr. Manhattan, he was exposed to some form of radiation and has transformed into a new form of human being. Dr. Manhattan and perhaps

Rorschach are the only Watchmen who have powers which are clearly super-human. The others are all “human” using their natural abilities to achieve their goals, even Ozymandias though marked by superior intellect, is all too human.

Together the superheroes are troubled by the fear of nuclear war which is brewing, Ozymandias has the gift of precognition yet in this case cannot clearly see the future but senses nuclear disaster cannot be averted. There is another threat

much closer to home, the Watchmen are being killed off one by one.

Someone knows the secret identities of the Minutemen and Watchmen and are killing them. At first it seems to be a personal grudge as The Comedian was not liked by many other superheroes but as time progresses it seems a deeper plan is coming into play. The conclusion of the film brings together many of the theme dear to Moore’s heart. Ozymandias has been manipulating the energy signature of Dr. Manhattan so he bring about a nuclear attack on a range of cities around the earth. But this is not for some form of misanthropy; he wants to force the countries of the world to make peace. By using the energy signature of Dr. Manhattan he convinces the world that Manhattan is their common enemy and focused together in fear and hatred they unite together against the foe. Manhattan ultimately accepts his role as a sort of cosmic scapegoat and leaves mankind living





in a state of peace united in their hatred of him. He is literally banished and becomes an outcast beyond earth.

At the same time Rorschach, the embodiment of idealism, cannot accept this peace since it has been founded on a lie and is killed by Ozymandias. This ending brings up all manner of philosophical questions. Does the end justify the means, would killing hundreds of thousands be justified to save millions? Would peace achieved by a lie be a valid peace? Indeed is government simply a form of deception applied to bring about the common good? The major question is if it takes such a deception to achieve peace will it last anyway or is man beyond redemption? There are lots of interesting things to debate and ultimately the film leaves you with no easy answers.

To further appreciate the metaphysical quandaries the film examines, let's examine four of the major characters and their significance.

### **The Comedian**

The Comedian is a significant figure as he represents the decay of the superhero. He has become obsessed with the power "the mask" gives him and revels in violence and sex. He shoots a Vietnamese woman whom he got pregnant when she confronts him about the child and rapes one of the female Minutemen. He is an example of "absolute power corrupts absolutely" and is used by Moore to show how justice uncontrolled by law (internal or external) becomes dangerous. At the same time The Comedian represents someone without a "centre", he has



no sense of values while Rorschach, as we shall discuss, is even more violent yet is centred and works from a deeper perception of the world.

### **Rorschach**

Rorschach is the most confronting yet most interesting of all the characters.

A Rorschach test is one which inkblots are

used to reflect what is in your unconscious mind; Rorschach is hence a mirror image of the darkest side of humanity – its violence and destructiveness. Rorschach was a young superhero on the trail of a child killer, up until now his goal was to bring them to justice without undue violence. When confronted with the flesh of the child being torn apart by dogs he kills the murderer and realizes the utter degeneracy of the modern society – a world driven by sex, money and greed.

While he is exceptionally violent, his violence is driven by a vision of fury and hatred for the savagery of the human experience. He acts out of ideological necessity and only kills those who he sees as criminals. He is an idealist and believes in the need to purify mankind so when Dr. Manhattan and Ozymandias make a deal for peace, based on a lie, he refuses to accept it and dies for his integrity. While most of the superheroes are human Rorschach's mask constantly changes in a way that suggests he is somewhat more than human or at least has unique abilities.

### **Dr. Manhattan**

Dr. Manhattan is the true superman. He has been transformed by a nuclear disaster into a new state of being. He has moved way beyond humanity and can move throw matter manipulating space. From a philosophical position Moore uses Dr. Manhattan (named after the







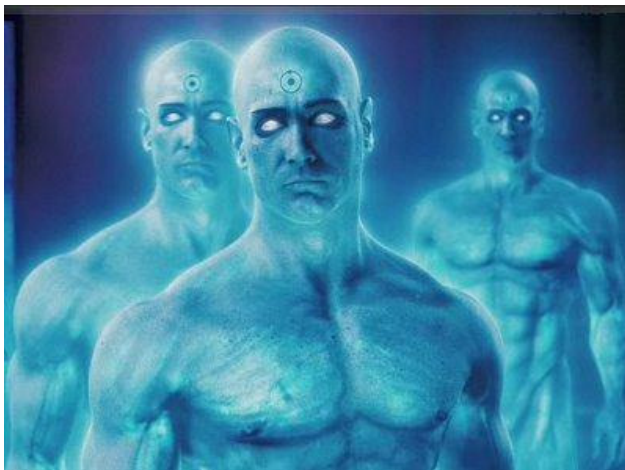
Manhattan Experiment which developed the atomic bomb) to represent the Overman or the Superman, the next stage of post human evolution. Dr.Manhattan has trouble dealing with mankind and as he evolves further he becomes more and more distant from the human species and their petty behavior. He is disgusted with their wars, environmental destruction and lack of values. When his girlfriend leaves him he loses his final connection with the human species and withdraws to the planet Mars creating his own environment leaving mankind to their own devices. It is hard to convince him to return to earth, his logic cannot be faulted, by the compassion of his girlfriend for mankind touches him and they return but it is too late. Ozymandias has used his weapons and Dr.Manhattan is blamed.

What happens next is intriguing and again reflects Moore's philosophical background. Dr.Manhattan is the ultimate outsider, he is the man who has left "Plato's Cave" and sees the world for what it is, he cannot really remain with mankind for he sees too much and ultimately

mankind will see him as a threat. In the land of the blind the one eyes man is a king or an enemy. Dr.Manhattan follows the "path of blame", this is a Sufi mystical practise which avoids the power of the ego by accepting blame for things one did not commit. This motif is found in many films including *Batman:The Dark Knight* when Batman saves the reputation of Gotham City by accepting blame for a killing he did not commit and becomes an outcast. Dr.Manhattan as the superman accepts blame for the destruction of the cities of the world and banishes himself becoming outcast. This motif of a great being becoming outcast to save mankind is as old as man himself from Prometheus who steals fire from heaven to the serpent in the Garden of Eden. While Dr.Manhattan accepts the role of scapegoat and plays out the game of Ozymandias he knows that ultimately it is futile as mankind has not developed enough to achieve real peace and all he is doing is stalling the inevitable.

### Ozymandias

Ozymandias is a name taken from sonnet by Percy Shelley and was the title of Ramesses the Great, Pharaoh of the nineteenth dynasty of ancient Egypt. It is a hint to the nature of the character in the film, he represents a great leader in decline, someone who is obsessed with his own vision of empire and will achieve it at all costs. He is dominated by intellect to such an extent he is unable to see the cost of his actions. He is cold, calculating and unfeeling and being without compassion does not realize that the end does not necessarily justify the means. He brings about world peace but at the cost of most of the superheros, hundreds of thousands of lives and the banishing of Dr.Manhattan and ultimately it may not last anyway since mankind has a short memory and Dr.Manhattan will, at





some stage, become a myth and legend and man's desire for war fed by greed will again re-surface.

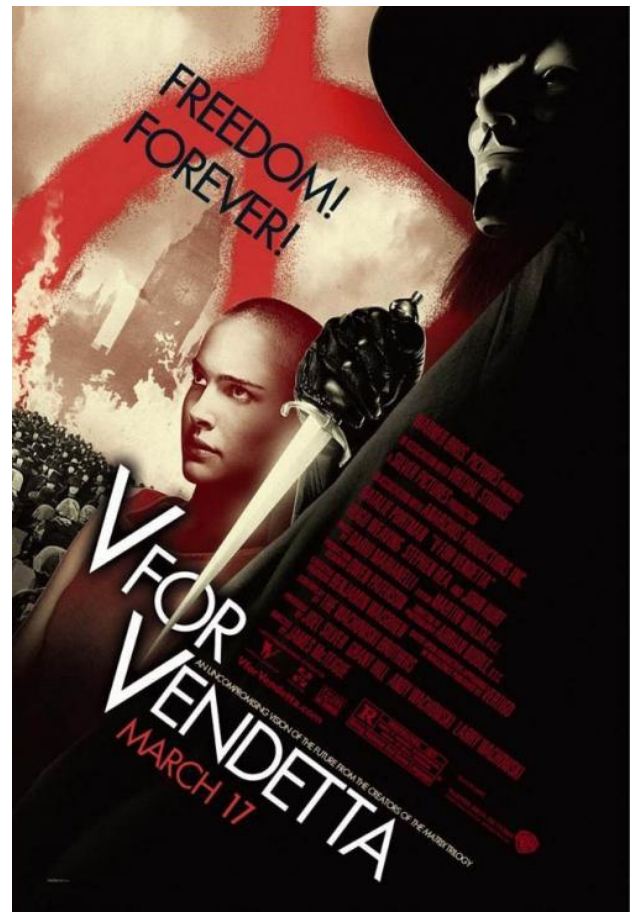
### V for Vendetta (2005)

*The building is a symbol, as is the act of destroying it. Symbols are given power by their people. By itself, a symbol is meaningless, but with enough people, blowing up a building can change the world.*

#### "V" in V for Vendetta

*V for Vendetta* is considered by many the best adaptation of Moore's work, though Moore complained they cut many of the drug and anarchist references from the film.

It is bleak vision of the future set in a time when Great Britain is ruled by a religious theocracy called Norsefire. Using the supposed fear of terrorists the government keeps total control in-



cluding strict censorship and forced re-education. The government is of the Christian fundamentalist persuasion and homosexuals (and other sexual minorities) are especially mistreated being held in detention centres. While Britain is safe, its safety comes at a great cost and people live without freedom with curfews which are strictly enforced. Indeed the government has begun to fake terrorist attacks to sustain an environment of fear and keep their iron grip on power intact.

William Rookwood (Hugo Weaving) was tortured in a local detention centre and on escape







has become the face of the resistance. He has become V and wears the mask of Guy Fawkes. He wreaks havoc with random acts of armed resistance attempting to wake up the populace from their political slumber. He is driven by fury, anger and revenge.

V rescues Evey from the secret police and decides to show her the truth of the political system. He uses a brutal yet effective method of political de-indoctrination and she joins his revolution. V is a very different sort of hero; he wants revenge for his torture in the detention centre, he is brutal and at times cruel and is obsessed with the goal of overthrowing the dictatorship. V prepares a final major act of political action, to blow up the Parliament and invites the people to rise up and join him.

*V for Vendetta* has a strong even polemical political message; many have viewed it as an ode to minority terrorism. With the rise of fundamentalism in politics (of all forms) the depiction of a Christian theocracy is powerful and relevant, it is also a nice twist to see John Hurt who was originally the victim in the film 1984 play Big Brother in this film.

*V for Vendetta* has a variety of themes, all poignant and thought provoking, they can be divided into political and social and personal.

The political and social themes include the danger of religious fundamentalism, the Christian rightwing's persecution of sexual minorities including supposed "sexual re-orientation therapy" and the use of terror to induce a state of fear enough to control a country. The final point is

certainly interesting considering the way terror has been used post 9/11 by conservatives and reactionaries to defend torture, detention without legal representation and extraordinary rendition.

One of the major themes is the issue of armed resistance and terrorism. Where does armed struggle end and terrorism begin? Peter Ustinov stated that "*Terrorism is the war of the poor, and, war is the terrorism of the rich*". While this may not ring true for rich Islamic fundamentalists declaring Jihad, it does fit Palestinians throwing stones at Israeli Trucks and soldiers. It is a major theme in *V for Vendetta* and one which needs to be seriously debated and considered.

It also leads to the major personal theme of the film, how the battle for freedom changes the individual and the cost of freedom. Woodward in becoming V becomes a monster, he may be a freedom fighter but it is unlikely he could even again adjust to a normal life. At the same time Evey by going through a sort of "Patty Hearst" conversion experience has also transformed from a newsreporter to a revolutionary. The question of the transformation of the individual through armed struggle is another intriguing theme and related to this is the nature of sacrifice. V knows he cannot survive in a normal world and hence sacrifices himself to end the role of Norsefire.

*V for Vendetta* is the most political of the adaptations of Alan Moore's film and certainly thought provoking in the current political climate.





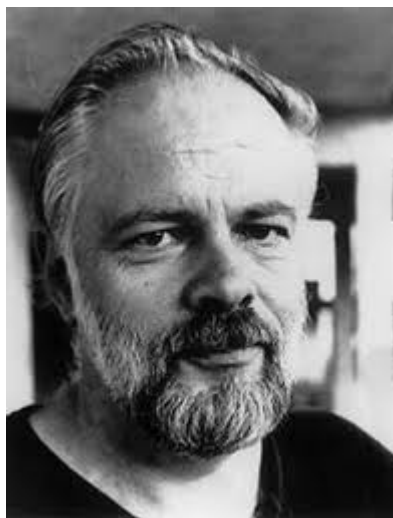
Philip K Dick (1928 –1982) was an American novelist, short story writer and essayist whose published work is found within science fiction and fantasy. Dick was strongly influenced by his interest in Gnosticism and explored sociological, political and metaphysical themes throughout his novels and short stories. Dick wrote 44 published novels, 121 short stories, many of which appeared in science fiction magazines during his lifetime and a range of philosophical works, the most significant being the nearly impenetrable *Exegesis*.

To truly appreciate PKD requires an understanding of the nature of Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a pre-Christian myriad of movements which were of primarily Jewish nature but mixed with Greek and Hellenistic philosophy. Each sect had its own unique take on reality most believing that the origin of life was far removed from the physical sphere and that a Demiurge or lesser creator formed life on each.

This Demiurge was classified as good, bungling or even malefic depending on the sect. Each re-interpreted the various Jewish sacred texts in light of their understanding, many concluding that the serpent of Genesis was a saviour rather than a figure of evil. These sects continued post the Christian revelation and a wide range of "Christianities" resulted; these became known more generally as Gnosticism. It was only in the third century that the collision of Christianity and political power in the form of Emperor Constantine caused the suppression of the Gnosticism

and the formation of what is known as Orthodox or mainstream Christianity. Many sects survived underground including the Cathars whom against the first Crusade was undertaken.

*"March 20, 1974: It seized me entirely, lifting me from the limitations of the space-time matrix; it mastered me as, at the same time, I knew that the world around me was cardboard, a fake. Through its power of perception I saw what really existed, and through its power of no-thought decision, I acted to free myself. It took on in battle, as a champion of all human spirits in thrall, every evil, every Iron Imprisoning thing."*



In 1974 PKD underwent a number of visionary experiences including a woman wearing a vesicle pi-sces, this was the secret symbol used by early Christians. While this vision was under medication, after the meds cleared the experiences continued and lead him to believe he had a parallel life living as a character named Thomas in

ancient Rome. He also believed there was a higher form of mind known as Valis or the transcendently rational mind which he had access to.

His experiences continued and he wrote a range of unusual novels exploring gnostic themes. He also wrote of these themes in a rather disjointed autobiographic philosophical work, largely unpublished, known as the *Exegesis*. The themes PKD became most attracted to were related to the nature of individual freedom,

the fluidity of time and parallel universes, the nature of metaphysical reality and the way in which such a reality impinged on human experience. Over time he became darker in his approach and developed a more dualistic gnostic view seeing man as somehow locked in the physical work and controlled by ambivalent "dominions and principalities". These forces were also reflected in the way large corporations, banks and governments limited freedom and enslaved the individual. Regardless of how we view his religious views or spiritual experiences a knowledge of them helps us gain insight into the idiosyncratic nature of his fiction and how this is reflected in films adapted from his work.

PKD's fiction was eccentric and at times philosophically confronting and while he won the Hugo Award for *The Man in the High Castle* in 1963 he spent most of his life publishing science fiction stories in pulp sci fi magazines living on the edge of poverty. PKD died on March 2, 1982, the result of a combination of various strokes accompanied with heart failure.

Dick's influence on science fiction cannot be underestimated, his many books are now celebrated as major works and his short stories are regularly celebrated. One of the most significant achievements has the adaptations of his work to the big screen. *Blade Runner* (1982) brought PKD's work to a wider audience, while his opinions varied of the film from outright abuse to praise; it nevertheless caused a reappraisal of his novels by the public. Considering that *Blade Runner* is believed by many to be the best science fiction film of all time it is a great compliment to PKD's genius.

### **Blade Runner (1982)**

*Blade Runner* (1982) was based on "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" and was the most successful adaptation of a PKD story. Ridley Scott was able to create a truly immersive world which brought PKD's vision of a dystopian



future to the big screen. As the film opens you are brought directly into contact with a society dominated by big business, the most overpowering building is the Tyrell Corporation and the skyline is dominated by advertising. This is PKD's vision of a world dominated by big money and where the poor are disenfranchised, the rich having moved off-world. The environment is devastated and animals are nowhere to be seen, the best you can do is buy a "replicant" animal as a pet such as bird or snake. The central theme of *Blade Runner* is the nature of consciousness. This is depicted as the tale of four escaped off world skin-jobs, the street term for replicants. Decker, a retired replicant hunter, played by Harrison Ford, has been called back to duty to find and "retire them". The replicants are actually "types" representing humanity itself. There is Zhora the female warrior and sex worker, Pris the pleasure model, Leon the work and Roy, the leader. Each has a limited lifespan







and is trying to find meaning. For PKD there is a metaphysical meaning in life but it means going beyond the roles to which we find ourselves assigned by our own upbringing, the society and perhaps even the universe. Since these four replicants cannot transcend themselves each dies and loses any chance at immortality. Roy comes closest when he realizes his life as a slave but still cannot escape, in that memorable scene as he reaches close to death he states...

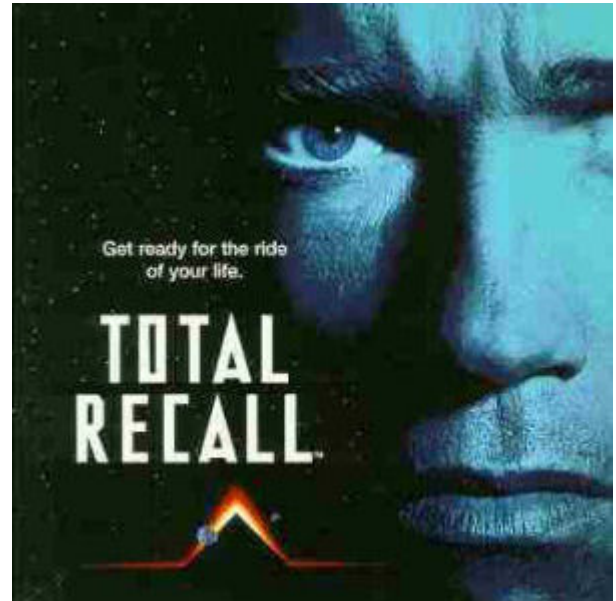
*"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I've watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those ... moments will be lost in time, like tears...in rain. Time to die".*

Other commentaries have suggested that since Roy showed compassion by saving Decker and the related religious imagery used (a nail in the hand and a dove being released) Roy out of all of them is the only one who becomes truly human.

In the final editions of the film Scott suggested that Decker was also a replicant, the story by PKD also states that Tyrell himself is a replicant, so the idea that all humans are replicants, automatons searching for freedom is the prime message.

### Total Recall (1990)

Total Recall was based on "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale". It is a mass market film yet once again including many significant themes. The storyline focuses on Mars where a large corporation controls the supply of air, rumour has it there is alien technology on the planet which could supply air without cost but, of course, the company is keeping this under wraps. A resistance movement works to attempt



to access the alien technology as the limited air supply is causing mass deformities in children born on the planet. On Earth a worker with a seemingly normal life decides to use the very latest technology, a virtual holiday. For some reason he is attracted to the idea of being a spy from Mars and plans his holiday meticulously. When the holiday is implanted all hell breaks loose, it seems he was already "programmed" and a series of events unfolds which changes his world and the world of Mars forever.

Total Recall, though a mass market film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sharon Stone, still has much philosophical content. The overarching tale of big business hiding a technology which could save lives has much resonance with the story of Nikola Tesla and his discoveries of free energy, something PKD was very interested in. The various levels of memories, brainwashing and programing again bring us to the question of how we really are. If we live for ten years programmed to believe we are an average worker with a wife and little worries







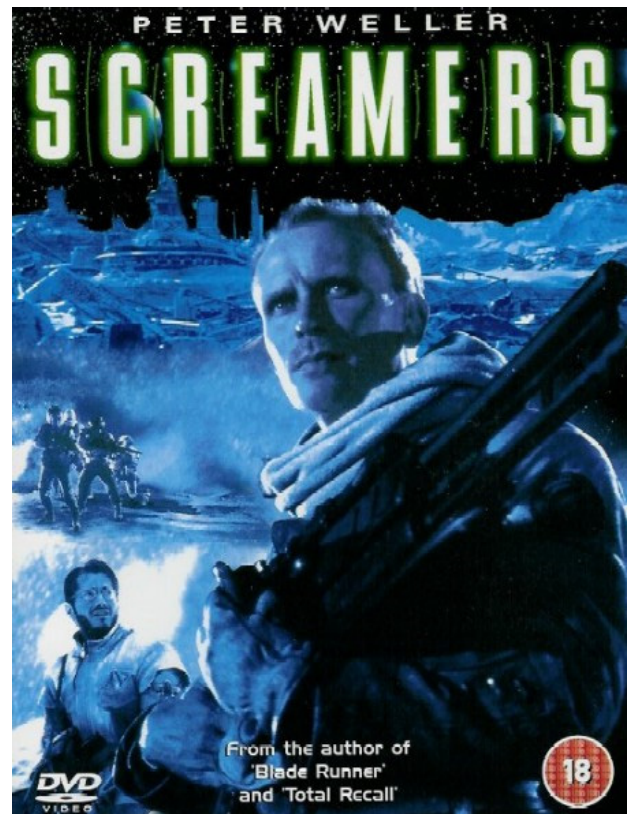
and yet originally were a spy from a large company which ultimately is true. PKD plays with our understanding of memory and identity and offers a fascinating and interesting tale.

**Confessions d'un Barjo** (French, 1992) was based on "Confessions of a Crap Artist", unreleased in English speaking countries I only mention it for reference.

### **Screamers (1995)**

Screamers was based on "Second Variety" and while less philosophical than Blade Runner has interesting themes. A distant mining planet is in the middle of a civil war, it is long in the future, the year is 2078, and robotic warfare is the name of the game. Both sides of the battle have been decimated and hence Col. Hendricksson (Peter Weller) one of a small number of remaining Alliance soldiers has decided enough is enough.

The powers that be, governmental and big business, have sacrificed enough lives and it is time



to make peace with the opposition, the New Economic Bloc. However there is a problem, the robotic killing devices made to protect the Alliance have taken on a life of their own, they are self replicating and have now transformed their program to kill all organic lifeforms. Screamers, while primarily an action film, focuses in on a number of key PKD themes.

The way in which governments and big business manipulate workers for their benefit, the stupidity of war and the cost to the soldier and the development of consciousness from artificial life.

### **Impostor (2001)**

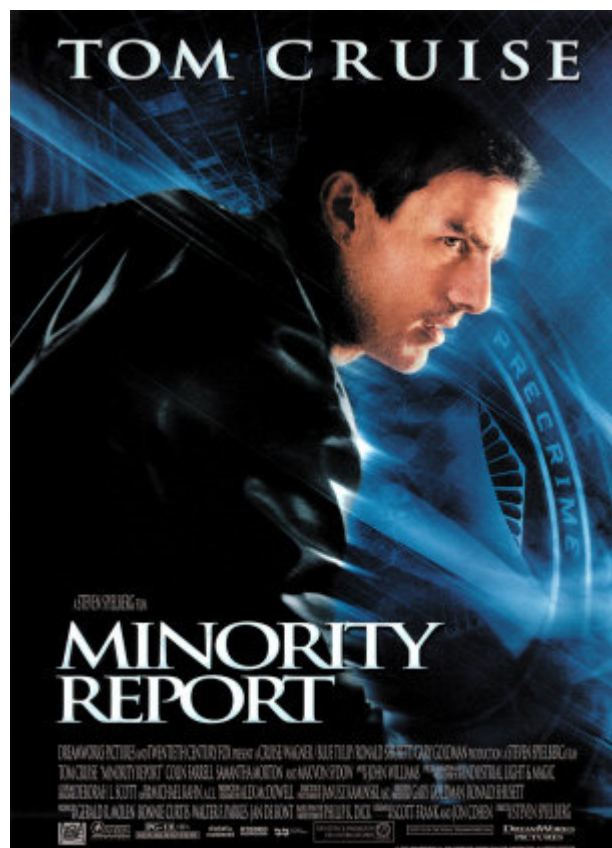
Sometimes a film based on a PKD short story doesn't seem to have enough to build a plot and this seems to be the case with Impostor which was based on the PKD tale "Impostor." It is beautifully looking film, well-acted with some major Hollywood stars but generally doesn't go further than one core theme. It was originally a 30 minute episode created for an anthology film and sadly it shows. Earth is at war with a race of genetically superior aliens who want nothing more than to conquer earth. As the countries of the earth have developed protective domes the aliens have created genetically engineered ro-



bots to take the place to key personnel, each with programmed missions. The robots have the memories, senses and perceptions of the people they replace and indeed do not know they are robots until the moment of self detonation. The story focuses on PKD's favourite them of consciousness and identity. Would we be aware if we were replaced with a robot of the same memories? PKD believed it was possible for people to develop a higher sense of awareness but that most people do not have it. Accordingly most people are like the replicants in the film, they make love, work, eat and party but ultimately have no real deep perception of themselves below the surface. While this is an interesting theme it is the role one stretched throughout the film and hence Imposter is rather superficial.

### Minority Report (2002)

Minority was based on the PKD tale "The Minority Report" and is a very innovate examination of justice and a police state. Imagine you could know when a crime is about to be committed just minutes before it happens, would it be justified to intervene and charge the person ? This is the premise of this provocative tale. Tom Cruise, John Anderton, is dedicated to the project since his son was taken at a local swimming



pool and his marriage disintegrated. He is dedicated to his job and has no reason to doubt the efficacy or morality of the pre-emptive system of justice now in place considering crime is nearly non existent. The three psychics who provide the information seem to be highly accurate and everyone is proud of the new society that has been born. But utopias have a way of not being quite what they seem and when Anderton is accused by the system of being about to commit a murder the threads begin to unravel. He comes to learn about "minority reports," reports made by one of the psychics which may disagree with the others. These are normally ignored and suppressed so the majority evidence can be used to achieve the desire goal.







The story once again has a strong criticism of big business, governments and the power of the police state. Even if crime could be totally eradicated would the resulting loss of freedom be acceptable? PKD's exploration of justice is disquieting and thought provoking.

### **Paycheck (2003)**

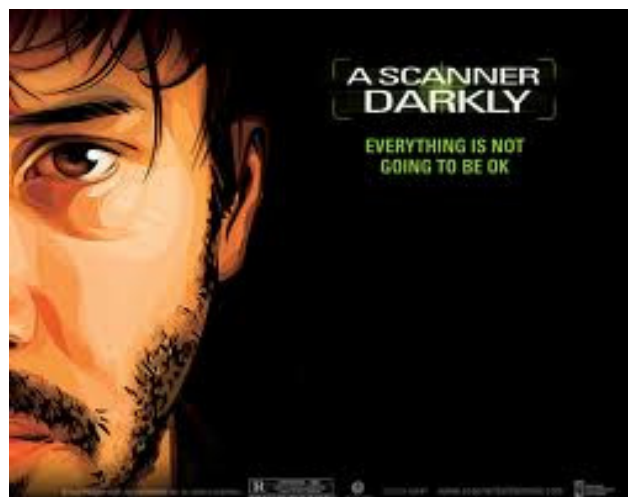
Paycheck was based on a short story by PKD called "Paycheck." It was a major release film, directed by John Woo and starring Ben Affleck and Uma Thurman. Its major themes include big business, the nature of time and memory and personal identity. Michael Jennings (played by Affleck) has the ability to reverse engineer just about anything, he is hired by big business to gain access to competitors technology. However there is a hitch, so he doesn't use the information gained to benefit himself or another company his memory is wiped at the end of each job. This time, however, something goes wrong, when he awakens he find he has signed over the not insignificant amount of pay for his last job to the company. When he tries to piece together what has occurred he notices that the items he has "left himself" are different from



what he remembers and this leads to a long investigation. He finds himself being chased by the FBI and suspected of treason and murder. The end result is the discovery of a machine that can manipulate and control the future, a very dangerous device in the hands of big business and the government. Once again PKD explores memory and identity but with a focus on the danger of big business and government. While John Woo has placed a very strong emphasis on action sequences and so the film really doesn't reach the higher stands of other PKD adaptations but it is still intriguing and worth watching.

### **A Scanner Darkly (2006)**

A Scanner Darkly was based on "A Scanner Darkly" and is in my mind a very difficult film. It has been with animation and voice overs from major Hollywood actors and many of these seem to overact in an alarming manner Robert Downey Jnr as James Barrie is especially annoying. The premise of the film is interesting





and explores the movement from democracy into a totalitarian state, one which PKD saw developing in the United States as well as the use of drugs to trigger a change in the perception of reality, for good or ill. It also explores the dangers posed by a new drug called Substance D, paranoia, drug rehabilitation and related themes. Certainly PKD's own experiences with psychedelics and other drugs helped inform the story and the film.

### **Next (2007)**

Next is a fascinating exploration of fate and time based on "The Golden Man" by PKD. Cris Johnson (Nicholas Cage) works as a Las Vegas showroom magician. He only makes a measly income and supplements his income by manipulating card games and living under assumed name, he works hard to keep under the radar but this is not always possible. While he pretends he act is a fake, there is more to him than meets the eye. Since he was a child he could see the future and move through time to about two minutes in the future. His abilities are limited as interacting with time can also change time as well. When the government tries to recruit help to prevent a terrorist attack he is loath to become involved since he was tormented as a child with medical and psychological tests to



assess his abilities under the auspices of a government secret program.

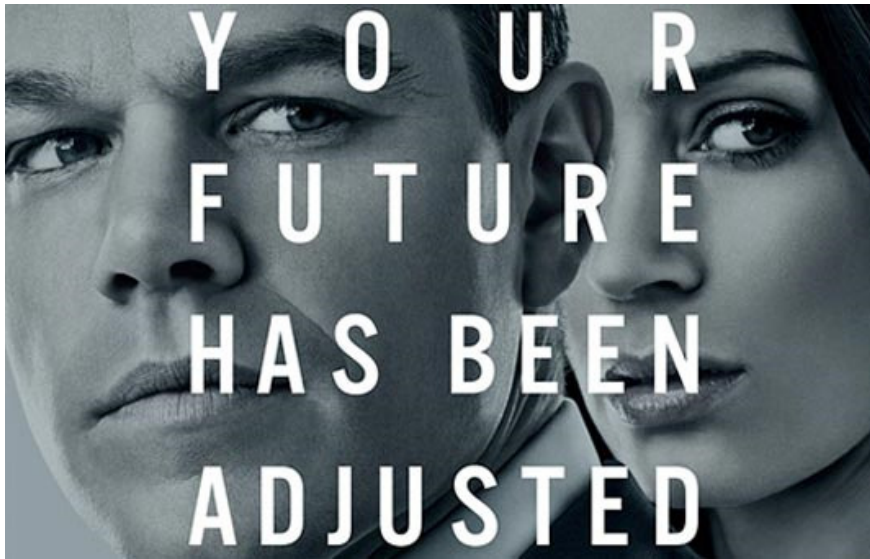
Johnson has a series of visions of a young woman which seem way beyond his normal two minute limit but doesn't realize their significance. When he meets her she becomes the key to him becoming involved with agent Callie Ferris to stop the denotation of a nuclear device which would destroy L.A.

This is an extremely complex and intelligent adaptation of a PKD story. While the primary theme is time, fate and our ability to know the future it also ties in a range of lesser themes to make this a fascinating film. It particularly considers the relationship between freedom and responsibility and this is examined through the fact that coercion will not get Johnson to help the government only the realization that his potential girlfriend is at risk. This is not petty sentimentality but a personalization of the nuclear threat which brings home to him the risk. There is lots of actions, some great special effects and lots of thought provoking ideas about fate and time.

### **The Adjustment Bureau (2010)**

The Adjustment Bureau (2010) was based on "The Adjustment Team". It is a startling and original science fiction film based on the "Adjustment Team" by sci-fi author Philip K. Dick. The central question the film poses is whether we control our own destiny and this is explored in an innovative and creative manner. Matt Damon plays David Norris, an up and coming politician on a career trajectory to the Whitehouse. Everything seems to be working perfectly to get him to his goal right on schedule, but perhaps it is all a bit too perfect. One





day Norris arrives earlier to work than expected and finds strange workers engineering the reality of his world, his co-workers are frozen in time and their minds are being controlled. The truth, it seems, is that the behind the veil of everyday life are “adjusters”, beings who manipulate mankind to achieve certain ends. While their goals are for man’s benefits their methods can be brutal even fatal.

As the film progresses we come to understand that these adjusters have been working throughout mankind’s history and each time they have given man “free reign” disaster has resulted. The Chairman would prefer mankind understand and use their free will but each time mankind has had the opportunity to use it they have created dark ages, wars and catastrophes, now mankind has put the globe at risk. The film centres on the battle between the adjusters and Norris over Elise. He loves her and wishes to share his life with her, they have decided he will be president and she a great dancer. They have done everything to manipulate his life so he can become president including being involved in the death of his father and the suicide of his brother. They warn him that if he tells anyone about them they will wipe his memory and he will end up a vegetable.

The conflict becomes more and more extreme and finally Norris faces the adjusters on their own turf. The film is made more interesting by the presence of “doorways” - these

are openings from one portal of physical space to another by the use of an adjusters hat. Norris is able to use them with the help of a sympathetic adjuster, Harry Mitchell, bringing the story to an powerful climax.

Philip K. Dick had a great interest in Gnosticism and the depiction of angels and adjusters and the spirit world as a vast bureaucracy has much in common with early Gnostic traditions. Norris never meets the “Chairman” who in gnostic theology would be the creator of the world who is not necessarily seen as God but as a demi-god of dubious character. In

many ways this is reflected throughout the film as you wonder about the morality of the adjusters and what they are doing. Harry as the rebellious adjuster or angel resonances with the Gnostic view that the angel who rebelled against heaven was a good rather than evil character helping bring free will to man a bit like Prometheus bringing fire own from the heavens.

This is certainly an original work of science fiction which has a highly idiosyncratic plot with some great special effects. The character development is excellent from Norris and Elise to Harry as the rebellious angel, in this case one who works in the service of good. The adjusters are superbly bureaucratic and the spirit world as a giant office block filled with accountants and officer workers is a nice twist. In an industry filled with a lot of films with similar plots and an over reliance on special effects this is a real joy.





Every culture has its heroes, from a great tribal fighter to an imaginary larger than life being. Some have featured in the classic legends and literature; others have come from popular fiction. It is these latter ones that we will look at. Despite their rather common beginnings these superheroes were still often strongly moral and patriotic. They used their superpowers to supplement the work of the Police in ways that were not available to the cops. Many had a strong vigilante attitude and a somewhat relaxed attitude to the mainstream legal system.

Why superheroes? To most people they represented a powerful and honourable, if imaginary, way to handle the difficulties of life. The philosophical concept of the superhero is often traced to the theory of evolution where the possibility of a new form of humanity or new mutations are suggested, this is especially seen in early Social Darwinism. It was further elucidated in the work of Fredrich Nietzsche in the concept of the Overman and in George Bernard Shaw's play *Man and Superman* (1903). After WWII the concept of the Overman was tarnished by its German origins and Nazi distortions and hence it was adapted into a new pro American form post WWII. It is particularly noticeable that many of the comic book superheroes appeared or rose to prominence during or immediately after major real-world problems – the Depression, World War II, the Cold War and the current crop of wars taking place in the Middle East. In the United States particularly, every crisis seems to revive the superhero genre whether based on

comic books or work of literary fiction such as the Bible. The idea of the superhero as the avenger of the common people when the police are either inept, corrupt or just unavailable is central to the major superhero periods during the depression when the average person was often a victim of crime but could not gain recompense or justice.

There will always be a superhero to protect the innocent and, of course, the American Way. They were also a welcome change from the detective and cowboy characters in early comics and stories. Generally they avoided science, relying on beating the snot out of their adversaries. The Phantom is one of the few to use guns and he never used them to kill people.

The term "superhero" goes back to DC Comics and Marvel Comics. They both claim rights to





the name and its variants but the word has become so generic that it is used impartially by many other companies.

When people take these fictional characters too seriously there will always be someone who will make a spoof superhero. We will look at some of these later.

Like Frankenstein's monster some of the best stories come from rogue superheroes who go out of control. A good story now will often have the superheroes keeping a low profile, if not actually outlawed such as the X-Men and Watchmen. This movement away from patriotic superhero to outlaw and outsider I think reflects the current ambivalence in the public towards governments and the military post Iraq and Afghanistan. It does seem that as public disquiet has increased over American foreign policy superheroes have moved from patriotic protectors of the American way to outlaws.

### Characteristics of a Superhero

From the first appearance of Superman in DC Comics' Action Comics #1 in 1932 superheroes have evolved a relatively standard set of characteristics.

### Dress and Sex

He / She will have a physique that is either unlikely or fantastic (Toxic Avenger) or at least enviable (Wonder Woman). Due to an incredibly bad dress sense they will usually wear gaudy costumes with their underpants on the outside. Their suit will often have a large letter or graphic on the front or at least some clear mark of identification. The cape, though, is not universal or



compulsory. Apart from Batman and Superman most don't bother with a cape. Later superheroes (Blade etc) are dressing more appropriately for the job with lots of leather, padding and armour. They still don't look as sexy in leather as Catwoman, though.

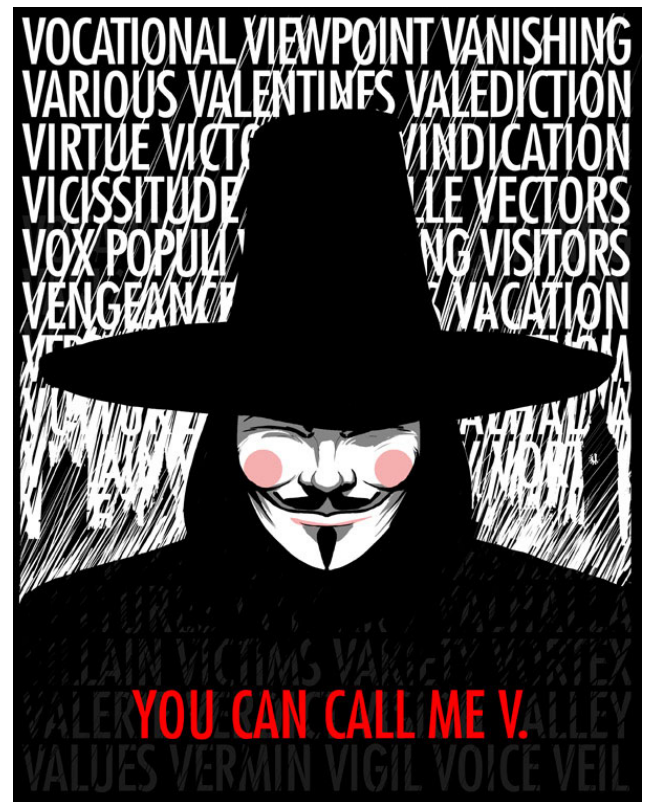
Their dress will enhance the sex appeal of their physique. The strange relationship between sex and the superhero is found throughout most of the superhero characters. They present a sexualized image yet seem to suppress or control their sexuality. Superman wears a revealing outfit (at least for the time) and yet approaches Lois Lane in a demure way. An interesting tit-bit concerns the early version of Batman and Robin, Burt Ward who played Robin had a rather large appendage and since he wore very tight costume pants he was given a medication to shrink his penis during each episode! Modern superheroes seem more sexually obvious, look at some of the outfits worn by the modern Batman and Catwoman, yet still are seen as outsiders if not a bit dysfunctional.





Batman might be very attractive yet his way of life drives away the women he loves. Dr. Manhattan in Watchmen may be able to change form and satisfy his girlfriend in unusual ways but he is so beyond humanity that he seems distant if not alien from her. When she dumps him he becomes so misanthropic he retreats to Mars and leaves mankind to destroy themselves with nuclear war. A sentiment some of us can easily understand! In the end she is able to bring him back to help mankind but it is too late.

There have also been gay overtones to many superheroes especially with Batman and Robin, while the early movies were not made that way they have a distinctly campy look to them today and Batman and Robin seem rather attached to each other. Of course this has led to a wealth of gay "slash" fiction where anonymous authors write explicit erotic tales about the superheroes and what they do to each other. These are found all over the internet and usually come with related rather amusing images. I am sure it would be enough to make even a superhero blush! Probably the most powerful image of the superhero as gay antihero is from V from Ven-



detta, tortured for being gay he becomes a revolutionary even a terrorist in his fight against a repressive state.

At the same time there are lesser known gay superheroes. Alan Moore wrote the famous Watchmen series, in it Jetman has been with his lover since 1949. In Manhunter (DC Comics) the son of the Green Hornet Obsidian has a difficult time of it until he realizes he is gay and comes out of the closet. Phat and Vivisector in X-Force and X-Statix (Marvel Comics) are a human and werewolf couple who develop a gay relationship. In Young Avengers (Marvel) there is a nice twist Wiccan and Hulkling want to





come out to their respective parents as superheroes but their parents just presume that they are telling them they are gay. Whether they are or not is not explicitly stated but the nonchalant way their parents accept them as a couple is rather cute. While most of these have not made it to the movie screen (even Jetman was not pictured in Watchmen) they do show that the concept of the Gay superhero is going strong.

### Origins

They will usually have a scientific or pseudo-scientific origin. Radioactivity was a popular starting point for a superhero after World War II – getting bitten by a radioactive spider, for instance. Before the properties of radiation became better known we had Superman gaining his superpowers from originating on the planet Krypton. He would have been an ordinary baby there but when he arrived on Earth his powers were magnified. In spite of this most superheroes wouldn't know how to use a computer unless it was to hit a villain over the head with it.



Over the years their powers have increased as the writers discovered new technologies that could give an edge. Most superheroes simply rely on brute force to do the job. Batman with his technology and the Phantom and The Shadow with their guns are anomalies.

### Identities

Superheroes must have a secret identity that will be disguised by a small mask when in superhero mode. Nobody will possibly recognise them, even without a mask, but protecting their identity is a major theme in the plots. The mask of the superhero also has strong psychological significance. This was explored quite clearly in







Watchman, the superhero somehow is able to overcome his normal everyday “humanness” and become a “super” being where he puts on his mask or uniform. This deliberate separation between man and superhero is central to pretty well all the stories. Often the superhero will lose his powers if revealed or in the case of Rorschach in Watchmen he becomes unstable and simply cannot function without it.

### Enemies

Superheroes will always have a Nemesis – no self respecting superhero would be seen without one trying to kill him at regular intervals. Batman got the kinky ones, Superman got Lex Luthor, Blade got the vampires. Often the villain is seen as significant as the superhero; with Heath Ledger as the Joker it was hard to tell which was more memorable. The conflict between good and evil moved from very simplistic in the early days of superhero comics and movies to far more complex in more recent films. In the



Dark Knight, Batman seems as disturbed and dysfunctional as his enemy, the Joker. The complexity of morality has become a more interesting theme in modern superhero films and in many cases the old patriotism (“Truth, Justice and the American Way”) has been largely put aside.

### Other Characteristics

They can strike a pose at the drop of a hat. Who can forget the legendary pose of Superman as he leaps into the air? Or Wonder Woman, legs akimbo and hands on hips?

Superheroes should, by definition, possess one or more superpowers - X-Ray vision, summoning magic lassos, turning water into wine, throwing super-strength spider webs, etc. Iron Man’s powers are built into his suit. One exception to this rule is Batman. What he lacks in superpowers he makes up for with brains and technology. He also has a cool Batmobile.

They will be quick thinking and strikingly intelligent (apart from their dress sense)

Every superhero will have a weakness (such as Kryptonite in Superman’s case) that can reduce them or their superpowers to a vulnerable state.





### Female Superheroes

These are often female versions of an established male superhero: Supergirl, Batgirl, and Spiderwoman are typical examples. They generally have fewer superhero attributes than their male equivalent but look much better in spandex. Wonderwoman was one of the few to have no direct male equivalent. This chauvinist attitude is changing. Since most comics are drawn by men it is only natural that females should have sex appeal in the form of skimpy skintight spandex suits, long flowing hair and unlikely breasts.

The origin of these women is also varied. While Power Girl was another escapee from Krypton, Buffy the Vampire Slayer started out as an ordinary girl with latent powers of enhanced speed, agility and strength. She is also a departure from most superheroes in that she has “normal” friends. Wonder Woman is descended from a tribe of Amazons and gained her powers by genetics of birth, not by any radiation enhancement.

Batwoman is, like Batman, free of the traditional superpowers but has enhanced agility and a command of technology. She is also a lesbian which should upset the moral minority.

### Superheroes Worldwide

Every country has its superheroes but in the United States they are mostly based on characters created by DC Comics and Marvel Comics. Once the success of the new genre became apparent most comic publishers developed their own superheroes so the world is now infested by them. The American superheroes will be the ones we will mostly look at here.

Superheroes in other countries are fewer but they are there. Britain has Doctor Who and even France and Belgium have the happy little Roman-bashing Gaul, Asterix.

Staid Moslem countries now have their own superheroes. A series of comic books called “The 99” draws on Islamic culture for its heroes’ attributes. Each of the heroes will have powers based on one of the 99 attributes of Allah. This is a tricky job considering the sensitivity of many of the sects of Islam to personify anything to do



with Allah but Naif Al-Mutawa, the creator of the series, seems to have made it work. In this respect it is no different to the comic books and films based on the Christian superhero Jesus. Films based on the comics may follow.

There is, of course, a Jewish Hero Corps as well. It is led by Menorah Man who can grow eight arms and shoot flames from them. Given the perilous state of Israel’s existence and the persecution complex of Jewish people, the Jewish Hero Corps is probably popular for exactly the same reasons as the earlier American superheroes – saving us from reality in times of trouble.

Japan has a rich range of superheroes but if you exclude those that have only appeared in one film or comic so far, the number is smaller. Many of their superhero shows are aimed at kids rather than adults. A few of these have



made it to western TV, like Power Rangers (known in Japan as Sensei Rangers).

### Spoofing the Superheroes

Since World War 2 we have seen a growth in minority group superheroes. From the 1960s blacks, women, gays, even kids all now have a place in the genre. Some of these have been used to lampoon the caricature heroes. The film Kickass, for instance, looks at a teenager so obsessed with the idea of becoming a superhero that he buys the gear and goes on the streets. A complete lack of fighting ability does not hamper him. What does hamper him is that the baddies keep beating him up until he is taken under the wing of a ten year old girl. She is being trained up as a hero by her father, also a superhero.

Not yet made into a film, the comic Hispanic Batman with his saggy wrinkled uniform, bad shave and beer gut is a savage spoof on elderly superheroes and the attitudes to Mexicans in the United States.

Even the Japanese have realised just how ridiculous some of the superheroes are. They have their own antihero who is kept on a retainer by the Japanese government in case of attacks by monsters. He has to rely on sponsorships to survive. Big Man Japan is a sad spoof showing what becomes of a superhero who is no longer needed. Then the monsters attack again and once more his services are wanted. Can he still handle them?

Superhero Movie managed to spoof just about all the great superheroes, as well as Steven Hawking, but what could you expect from a film with the legendary Leslie Nielsen and produced by David Zucker?

Mystery Men did the same with a group of inept wannabee heroes of doubtful abilities but strong self-belief.

*"We are number one. All others are number two, or lower"*

### Reaction of the public to Superheroes

In recent years the fickleness of public opinion has become a factor in a superhero's life. In The Watchmen we have a government ban on superheroes who must now go underground and hide from the very people they wanted to help.

As some superheroes become more antisocial their habits have changed. The vampire hunter Blade is a ruthless killer of the undead. He must now operate in an underworld hidden from most of the real world. His murderous actions would get him a prison term. Perhaps the modern realism has lost its sense of imagination? Superheroes are certainly not dying out but they seem to operate with a bit more discretion. The traditional shot of Batman standing on a high building would now have, down in one corner, a policeman trying to arrest him for trespass and breaking and entering. It would be interesting to see how Judge Dredd would deal with him.

This feeling is reflected in the public attitude shown in the films to newer superheroes like X-Men and Watchmen. In both, the superhero groups are shunned by society and must do their best to achieve their goals surreptitiously. Perhaps this is the reason that the older superhero films are usually set in the between-the-wars period when people had a more open-minded attitude. Or should that be "more gullible"?

Superheroes often reflect the attitudes of their times, although if those attitudes are a little ahead of the bulk of public opinion they will be criticised as well. Some issues such as homosexuality still make Americans uncomfortable, this was notable in regards to the mainly nega-



tive reception *V for Vendetta* had in America with much of the media denouncing it as a blueprint for gay terrorism ! Socially subversive actions such as promoting the power of women or non-Americans are also uncomfortable subjects. Fortunately there is now a thriving underground comic industry and there is a place for any sort of superhero there.

### The Main Superheroes

There are many, but few have lasted past a blockbuster movie or two.

#### Superman

Still the oldest and some say the best, he fights for Truth, Justice and the American way (whatever that is these days).

His powers include superhuman strength, X-Ray vision, telescopic vision, flight (he kicks off from the ground, which should leave a huge hole where his foot was), superbreath and other attributes that came and went according to the needs of the story.

He has no real offside. His nemesis is usually Lex Luthor, an evil scientist who knows of Superman's vulnerability to Kryptonite (the remains of Superman's home world).

His alter ego is mild mannered reporter Clark Kent. This necessitates him finding a convenient telephone booth where he can rip off his street clothes and change into the Man Of Steel. Surprisingly there seems to have been no reports to



police about a man stripping off in phone booths.

He has a girlfriend of sorts, fellow reporter Lois Lane. She even had her own comic series for a while. It began in 1958 and finished mercifully in 1974.

#### The Shadow

*"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows !"* (Cue evil laughter).

The Shadow began, unlike most superheroes, as radio serials and a series in pulp magazines in the 1930s.

Trained in ancient Eastern techniques to fight evil, The Shadow's main power is his psychic ability to become unnoticed in a person's mind. Effectively he becomes invisible to them. Only his shadow gives him away. Set in the period between the wars, his technology is a bit limited, but his accuracy with his fists and guns makes up for this.

He has starred in five films so far. Since the 1930s his character has evolved.

#### Spiderman

One of the more unlikely Marvel Comics superheroes, Peter Parker was bitten by a radioactive (?) spider and he mutated. His wall-crawler



abilities now include a range of spider weapons such as a gun that throws sticky webs that can truss up a criminal or be used as a rope to swing from building to building. He has incredible agility and great physical prowess. He is armed with “Stingers” that he can hurl at a foe and give them a massive energy jolt. He also has a “spider sense” that warns him of impending danger.

Spiderman originated as late as 1962 in *Amazing Fantasy*. He was an unusual hero, still being a teenager. In his non-Spiderman life young Peter Parker reflects all the problems of growing up at that time. He is shy and feels rejected and lonely, feelings that reflect those of many teenagers. Even in his later life as a college student his personality only comes out of its shell when he is in his Spiderman outfit. In spite of this, or perhaps because it does reflect the feelings of so many lonely teenagers, Spiderman is one of America’s most successful superheroes.

### **Batman**

The Caped Crusader originated with DC Comics’ *Detective Comics* in 1939. One of the most



ambivalent of the superheroes, Batman as his alter ego Bruce Wayne had to watch his parents murdered. He is now a millionaire and has devoted his life to cleaning up Gotham City. He has a young sidekick, Robin.

The Dark Knight has few great powers but he does have a good understanding of technology and has made a number of devices that he uses regularly in his exploits. He was the first superhero to use a computer. He is also a first-class detective. His operations are based in the Bat Cave, set underneath his mansion.

He is one of the few superheroes to actively cooperate with the police, who summon him by beaming a searchlight Bat Signal onto the low clouds always conveniently overhead in Gotham City. They apparently haven’t discovered radio yet. He has sometimes cooperated on an operation with his female counterpart, Batgirl.

He has a whole collection of weird characters to fight, from Catwoman to the Penguin.







### Captain America

Sickeningly patriotic and standing for all the values Americans like to think they have, Captain America was therefore one of the more popular superheroes. Marvel Comics deliberately introduced him in 1941 as World War II began to involve America so the timing for this patriotic superhero was appropriate. Rather than fight crime his main job was to fight the Axis powers and aid America's war effort

His alter ego is Steve Rogers, a mild and sickly young man who has been enhanced by a secret super-serum. His uniform is based on the American flag and he carries an indestructible shield that doubles as a weapon. He is everything the American nation could want in a time of war.

His popularity began to wane after the war and he was discontinued in 1950.

### Doctor Who

Britain's favourite superhero (although he has never been called that – just "The Doctor") was created by the BBC in 1963. Although the show is more like science fiction it still fits the super-

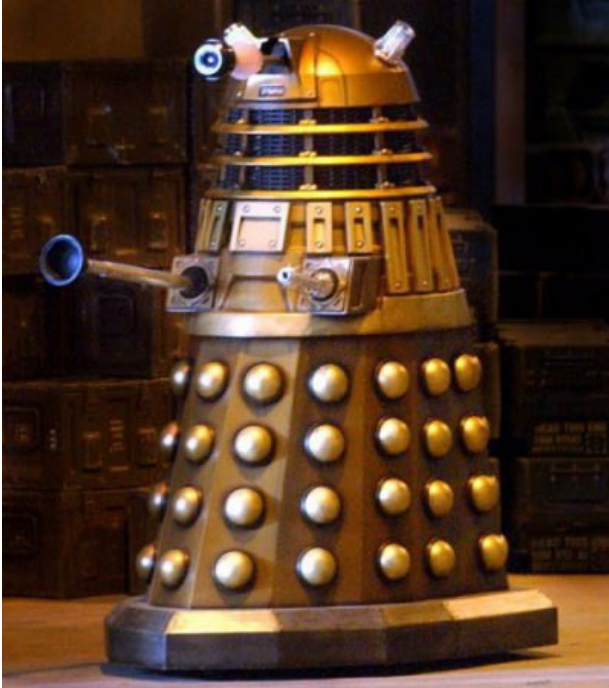


hero genre rather well. Britain's rather more rational answer to the superheroes is also one of the most durable. He has been around for decades on TV and for 900 years in his position as a surviving Time Lord. His speciality seems to be defending Britain against all the interplanetary villains.

He has no particular superpowers apart from an incredible ego and intellect (he is, after all, 900 years old and must have learnt something in that time). He can regenerate every now and then and usually comes out of it looking younger. He has a retarded fashion sense and thinks bow ties are trendy. He also has a time-travelling telephone box, the TARDIS, that is the equal of the Batmobile for sheer cool.

Over the years the Doctor has picked up many sidekicks, mostly male / female couples, and a host of enemies. The bulk of these enemies are





just men in funny suits but one group, the Daleks, have caught the public imagination. These vicious little killing machines are out to exterminate any life in the universe that cannot be enslaved but they have a special hatred reserved for the Doctor, who has thwarted them so often.

Doctor Who has spawned a number of characters with their own shows. It still remains firmly fixed as a TV program and as far as I know has never been translated to a comic book. An interesting program which was developed from Doctor Who was Torchwood which features Captain Jack, an immortal figure who could be seen as a sort of superhero. He is ferociously bi-sexual and flirtatious and the series explored many darker science fiction themes than most.



### The Green Lantern

The leading light of DC Comics, Green Lantern has a power ring that channels mindpower into a beam of green energy something like a laser, but it can also provide a self-protection force field. The ring is rechargeable from a green lantern. "In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight. Let those who worship evil's might, beware my power ... Green Lantern's Light! "

As a test pilot he was picked up by a spaceship. The dying alien occupant gave him his Green Lantern equipment.

His nemesis is Parallax, an ancient entity who has traditionally been the enemy of successive Green Lanterns.

The latest film version of the Green Lantern was presented as a comedy spoofing Batman. The character is depicted as a loud mouthed uncouth rich American who becomes a superhero because; well hell there is nothing else to do. It gets my vote for the worst film of 2011 thus far.



**Mystery Men**  
**1999**  
**Superhero Spoof**  
**Universal Studios**

Life is tough when you want to be a superhero. The public generally ignore you for the better known superheroes, you invariably get a hiding when you come up against the bad guys, and skunks get to hump your leg. In Capitol City the resident superhero is Captain Amazing. He is well known and loved but his popularity is fading because, lets face it, when you have locked up all the bad guys there is nothing more for you to do. Captain Amazing has had to resort to sponsorships to keep going.

The wannabes are a small group of men with doubtful superpowers such as being able to hit people with a shovel, fling table cutlery, and threaten to become enraged. Even when they do find crime to fight the event is hijacked by Captain Amazing.

Captain Amazing must find a villain worth fighting. He arranges to have Casanova Frankenstein, an arch-enemy, released from prison to give him an enemy worth his (and the public's) attention. Frankenstein activates his old group of Disco henchmen and is ready to take over the city. Of course Captain Amazing must bring him to justice and score a PR coup, but the job goes terribly wrong and the Captain is captured.



Now it is up to our nameless four to free him and beat the evil Frankenstein. They realise the magnitude of the task and recruit new members. The new team consists of The Shoveller (hits people with his shovel, as already mentioned), Blue Raja the cutlery expert, Mr Furious whose boundless powers are released by his rage, and the new members The Bowler, who has her father's spirit and skull embedded in her deadly bowling ball, The Spleen who can knock out a roomful of people with his lethal flatulence, and Invisible Boy who can only become invisible when nobody's watching. They are trained by The Sphinx, a superhero whose abilities are mostly rumoured and rarely seen. He teaches them teamwork. He also annoys some of them with his trite, shallow sayings. What he doesn't teach them is how to free Captain Amazing without killing him. Without the late Amazing's help can our inexperienced wannabe superheroes prevail against Casanova's evil?

The film is based on a comic book story and it preserves the comic book style perfectly. The would-be heroes are earnest yet can't help looking like a bunch of amateurs. Captain Amazing is suitably larger than life but is brought back to the level of mere mortals by his need to carry advertising into battle. Geoffrey Rush as Casanova Frankenstein plays a brilliant role with the right amount of hamming it up. He stops just short of the maniacal laughter, fortunately.

The film is a great and subversive spoof of the superhero genre. Its very shallowness is what makes it such great entertainment.



**Big Man Japan**  
**2007**  
**Eastern Eye / Madman**  
**R4 DVD**

Masaru Daisato is Dai NipponJin, a superhero who can grow to immense size helped by a massive dose of electricity. He is on a small retainer to the Japanese government to fight any monsters that appear. His father and his grandfather held the same job and passed their super powers down to their offspring. It is a pretty safe job now since there haven't been any monsters in Japan for a while. Dai NipponJin is living a quiet and rather lonely existence since his wife left him. He is relying on some sponsorship money that his moneyhungry agent arranges for him and is increasingly withdrawing into his own misery, spurred by a population that seems to have lost its belief in superheroes. After all, when you regularly see the spectacular superheroes of TV shows the real thing is a let-down.

The film starts off in an interview format in which he reveals something of the loneliness of the declining superhero. He has lots of problems that being a superhero can't solve, from trying to get together with wife and child to dealing with his senile grandfather who sometimes turns into a confused superhero again, in dirty underwear. Then the monsters strike. The Japanese have an odd idea of what a monster should be. There



is Smelly Baddie, whosesmell is like "10,000 faeces". Another monster, Squeazy Baddy, rips buildings off their foundations and lays its eggs in the hole. Jumpy Baddie has a single powerful leg and the mind of an 8-year-old so does a lot of unintentional damage. Perhaps the best is the monster whose eye is on the end of its long, whip-like penis. Dai NipponJin, demoralized and out of shape, deals with these monsters as required but there are complaints about the noise and massive property damage. Even a superhero is not appreciated these days. Then public opinion turns against him when he accidentally kills Baby Baddie, a baby monster who only wants to go back home but does a lot of property damage in the process.

When the next monster appears the demoralised Dai NipponJin is hard pressed to deal with it. Then help arrives from an unexpected source, in a sequence that looks more hallucinogenic than superhero, more TV show than reality show.

The film has a wonderful comic-book style that mirrors the stories it is lampooning. The monsters are hilarious. Even so we have to feel a certain regret that a superhero has fallen so low.







The word “anime” is an abbreviation of “animation”. Strictly speaking, feature anime films should therefore go all the way back to Walt Disney’s features *Clara Cleans Her Teeth* (1927) and *Steamboat Willie* (1928), but in the last couple of decades it has come to mean Japanese animated films. These are often based on manga comics, a sort of adult underground style which allows a certain amount of alternative culture. There is now a worldwide cult following of the anime genre. This has led to a “Westernisation” in the films. Similarly, western film producers have begun to use some of the more spectacular Japanese anime themes in their own work. More of this later. It is interesting to note that Disney Studios, once the masters of animation, are now distributing some Japanese anime titles like *Ponyo*.

Many conventions of those first Disney films have lasted to modern days. The cels (individual frame-by-frame pictures) are still sometimes produced by hand by artists, although today the artists mainly produce backgrounds and the basic character drawings. The animation content is generated and overlaid by computer. The peculiar convention of each character having a thumb and only three fingers per hand continues. This was intended as an economy measure to make cels easier to animate. The style is still mostly comic book style, a black outline filled with colour, again as an economy measure. Japanese animators have learned how to use the thickness and detail of the linework to produce distinctive styles. Emotions, action and character appearance are achieved mostly by altering the way the mouth and eyes are drawn. The style may look exaggerated and not quite real, but so does Mickey Mouse and it never held him back. Some studios are now experimenting with 3D shading in a major change from the comic book style. We recently saw an example of this in *Avatar*.

The first short non-commercial animations in Japan go back to around 1917 and the industry



evolved there largely unnoticed by the rest of the world. Post-World War II some cartoon shows slipped out such as *Astroboy* (1952). This show was the work of Osama Tezuka, now regarded as the founder of the current anime style. *Astroboy* was originally known as *Mighty Atom* but was overdubbed and renamed for world consumption. It was basically a kids’ show filling the same niche as Disney cartoons so it translated well to other countries. I remember watching *Astroboy* at the local Saturday afternoon matinee and, although I enjoyed it, there were still some parts I had trouble understanding.

Osama Tezuma was a fan of the Disney animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

(1937) and he may have found Disney's rewrite of the old Central European legend just as confusing.

The same confusion applied to mainstream anime. Although it covered just about all possible plot lines the themes of the films were often incomprehensible and hard for Westerners to grasp. The stars were often antisocial teenage kids and the adults evil or rabidly militaristic (and somewhat American-looking). There could be a supernatural aspect, drawing on Japan's rich history of legend. Post-apocalyptic scenarios were common. There was a thriving market for films on great machines called mechas. In the last decade the problems of growing up in a fairly rigid environment has become a popular topic. Most of these films did not suit Western tastes or were simply too hard to translate into a comprehensible westernised plot. It would be interesting to examine them from a psychological basis and see how much they were affected by Japan's loss of World War II in the Pacific. Do they show a distrust of adults? Is their love of mecha some sort of longing for the return of the days when Japan was a major military power? Or is the anti-militaristic attitude also a reminder of those times? We can see hints of WW2 in the paranoia of the Godzilla films, where the monsters are often the result of atomic technology gone badly wrong. In anime World War 2 is never mentioned. Any post-apocalypse films are set in a period "after World War 3" or "after the Tokyo Wars" or some other innocuous future war.

It took a brave company to bring these anime films out of Japan and present them to a western audience. In Australia we had the new company Madman in Australia who took the risk. The film *Akira* (1988) was shown in 1991 by the Australian ethnic network SBS, which had become a serious alternative to the lowest common denominator content of the commercial channels. Madman has continued to distribute anime to an increasing audience ever since and the genre is now widely accepted in Australia.

Let's now have a closer look at some of the characteristics of anime.

**Style conventions:** Economy is the name of the game here. The thumb and three fingers of the Disney days continues. The background artwork is skilled and usually painted in a softer focus or muted colours so the actors stand out.



There are a number of styles of depiction of characters, depending on which studio is doing the animation. The artists are experts in depicting facial expressions with an economy of line using conventions established many decades earlier – a wide open mouth and smaller eyes represents anger, for instance, and crosses for eyes represent unconsciousness. Girls are usually depicted with big puppydog eyes and tiny mouths unless they have an important role in the film, when they will be drawn more realistically. Boys usually have big mouths and bigger hairstyles.

**The role of women** is a break with Japanese pre-war traditions. No longer do they sit in the background sighing in a teenage crush. They are nearly always shown as alert, intelligent and active and some films feature women as the stars. For major roles they will have somewhat sexually stylised figures (such as in *Eiken*, which carried it to excess) and more realistic expressions. They may often have a more Western look. The image of the schoolgirl in the sailor suit still seems popular, though – some sort of fetish perhaps?

**The role of adults** is ambiguous. They are often treated with suspicion and may be the antagonist in the film. The evil military man or commander is a common character and seems to be a caricature of a wartime enemy. The evil



scientist is still present but is often replaced by a younger, 20-something girl or young man who will have a sense of social responsibility. Parents are usually depicted as hardworking but with traditional outlooks.

**Teenagers as heroes** coming of age is another popular theme. They seem to be presented as wiser than their age would indicate and they nearly always have strong emotions and ambitions. They are often aware of the bigger pictures of ecology, geopolitics and other areas usually left to adults. Perhaps we are being shown that the future belongs to the youth? Certainly many films reflect on the problems of youth, just as live films do..

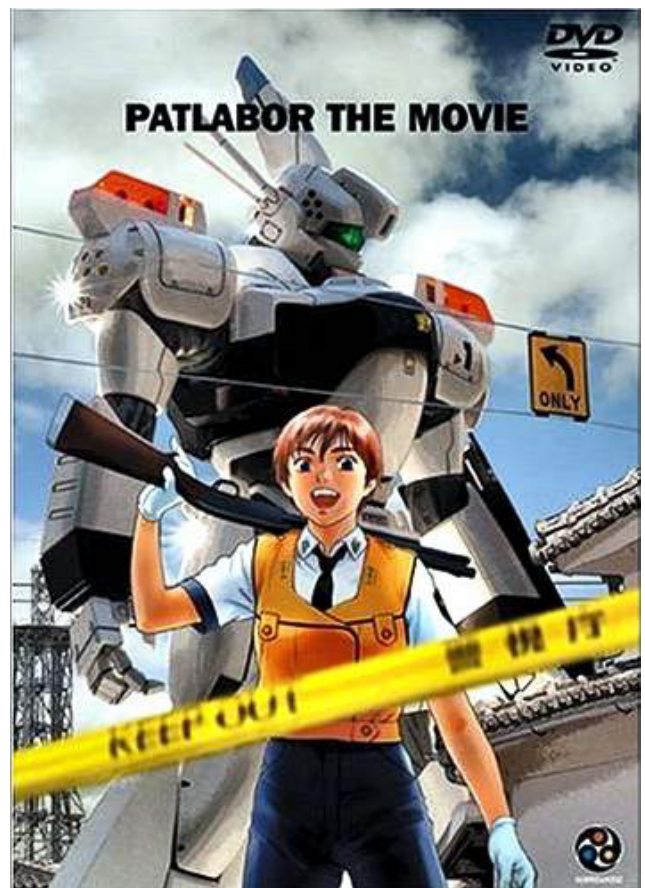
**Looser moral codes** are not a taboo subject but sexual activities are usually hinted at rather than shown. This theme is usually depicted in an asexual way. A lovelorn young man will be shown with a nosebleed rather than the more expected erection, but they aren't fooling anyone. This is one area of the manga adult comics that does not seem to have been translated into anime. Clothing, however, can be as sexy as the artist wants. Once we get past the schoolgirl image the girls are usually mature, sexily dressed, and as active in the film as their male counterparts. Where appropriate there will be large amounts of blood and gore, something the Japanese audiences don't seem to mind. This will often be found in the historical and sword-fighting epics based on Japanese history. It seems more realistic than the carefully sanitised inoffensive Western styles.

## Mecha

The robot mecha genre is always popular - mecha, transformers, exoskeleton suits and robots. There are subtle differences between the types depending on whether the owner wears them (exoskeleton suits, usually battle armour) or pilots them or remotely controls them. The mecha concept was outlined by Mitsuteru Yokoyama in a 1956 manga comic book *Tetsu-jin 28-go*, later made as a film and released internationally with the more memorable title *Gigantor*. The robot in this series was remotely controlled. Historically, though, there was an even earlier Western version of the mech - the Martian tripod fighting machines in the *War Of*



*The Worlds*. Could this have been an influence on the Japanese artists and writers? The mecha genre is now becoming acceptable in the Western film industry. Recently *Starship Troopers 3* featured battle mech robots with a range of weapons. These were under the remote control of the main character and show that the concept has appeal outside Japan. An alternative take on the concept were the mecha used in the *Star Wars* films, particularly the AT-AT walkers. Recently we saw battle mecha in *Avatar* (2009). They have become a popular item in computer war games.



An autonomous mech is unusual but not unknown. If a mech is self-aware it will often turn rogue in the best traditions of Frankenstein's monster. These mecha are usually war machines but in some films are seen in a civilian role as police aids and construction workers. An example is *PatLabor* (1988). The main example of the self-aware mech is the *Transformers* TV series and spinoff films. The idea was based on a Japanese transforming toy. U.S. writers produced plots and basic styles and the series was animated in Japan, where it was also shown as *Fight ! Super Robot Life Form Transformer*. OK, sometimes the translation doesn't work too well. The series became strongly commercial with the release by Hasbro of many Transformer toys.

The mecha in their huge robotic forms were largely defined in Go Nagai's film *Mazinger Z*. He was responsible for the concept of mecha piloted from a cockpit that has now become a standard in such films. *"I wanted to create something different, and I thought it would be interesting to have a robot that you could drive, like a car."* Nagai said in an interview. The popularity of the mecha genre is largely due to Ozama Tezuka's work. The work of these two was redeveloped in the late 80s by Yoshoyuki Tomino. He introduced the concept of the battle suit robot in films like the *Gundam* series (from 1979 on) and *Super Dimension Fortress Macross* (from 1982). His robots were not the godlike figures that featured in many later films. They were a battle accessory and as such could run out of power or ammunition. *Gundam* was intended for young boys but the practicality of the battle suits made it acceptable to adults as well. We recently saw a battlesuit in Neill Blomkamp's brilliant South African SF film *District 9* (2009).



AKIRA



Of course there are exceptions to all of these styles. Often the exception becomes a noteworthy film with its own cult following, such as the *Evangelion* (1985) series from the Gainax studio, featuring huge piloted mecha. I still can't work out what that was all about but I enjoyed each episode and I liked the mecha.

The popularity of mecha continues unabated and series are now available for all ages. Some original anime stories are being remade into more Westernised live action films, like the deep and brooding *Death Note* series. Other countries such as France have tried to enter the anime genre with varying success. Generally on the world markets they have been unsuccessful.

If you have not seen anime films before, here are some classics that are worth a look:

**Akira** (1988) – the one that really started the style's popularity in Australia. In Tokyo military scientists had turned a young boy, Akira, into a rampaging psychopath with psionic abilities. Akira was responsible for the destruction of Tokyo and now the military plans to release him from cryogenic suspension. Shotaro Kaneda, a young biker, has to try to stop Akira's release and save his friend Tetsuo who has been taken by the military to be converted to an Akira-like state as well. The military will try to use these Espers, as they are called, to regain control of the city. Neo-Tokyo is disintegrating into anti-government terrorism and urban rebellion. The biker gangs are one way for the youth to express some sort of independence. They were not a Resistance movement as such but are forced into resistance as the government tries to tighten its control over the people.





The film was based on a manga story by Katsuhiro Otomo, who rewrote the story in a way that better suited markets outside Japan. It is still in print and has been released on Blu-Ray.

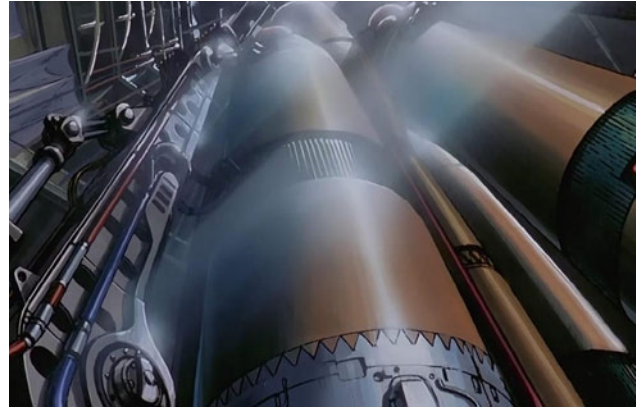
**Gunhed** (1989) is a classic battle robot anime film. Gunhed is a twenty-foot high piloted battle robot used by a group of mercenaries to penetrate the Khyron 5 supercomputer base in Tokyo Bay. The original war against humanity waged by Khyron 5 ended in a draw, but it is now about to release a new breed of robot that will give it world domination unless the group can penetrate its base and destroy it in time.

It is a continuous-battle film, almost video-game like in its action content. There is a brief moment when the Gunhed unit seems to be developing its own personality.

The film was remade into live action in 2008

**The Wings of Honneamise** (1987) This was the first film from the studios of Gainax and Bandai. It was not well received at first but as more people became aware of the film it has gained classic status.

It deals with the coming of age of Shirotzu, a young astronaut on a parallel Earth. Their space



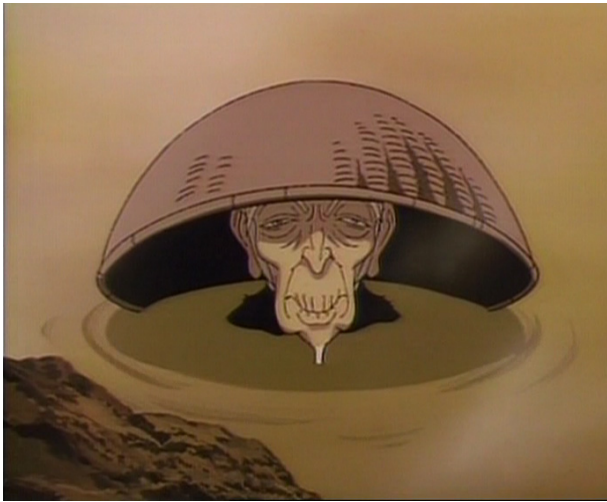
program is a joke after its constant failures and is in danger of being cancelled. War is looming and a space program will soon be unsupportable. Shirotzu faces an uncertain future and is demoralised although he believes passionately in the program. They have one last launch and Shirotzu is chosen as the pilot. Even he is unsure of himself until he meets a young woman who inspires him. The launch takes place during an invasion and Shirotzu barely makes it off the ground and into space. His achievement inspires the rest of the world.

Although the film could be seen as science fiction it deals more strongly with the emotions and self-doubts of a young man. The scientists and crew believe they can succeed. The only one who is unsure is Shirotzu himself.

The film is also notable for some brilliant and imaginative designs of aircraft and machines of war.

**Ninja Scroll** is a traditional swordsmanship epic set in an older feudal Japan. Jubei is a wandering masterless swordsman. Two warlords





have control of a secret gold mine but a shipment of their gold is sunk near the village of Shimoda. The clans recover the gold then poison everyone in the village to make sure there are no witnesses to their venture. If the Government knew about the gold mine the warlords would be killed and the gold and the mine seized by the Shogun.

The local warlord sends a party of ninja to investigate the deaths in the village. All are slaughtered except for a woman ninja, Kagero. She is captured and raped by a huge animated stone statue, but is rescued by Jubei. They fall in love but Kagero is poisoned. Jubei and his associates take on the two warlords in a battle on the ship now carrying the gold.

The film is strong on the theme of loyalty to your master, a characteristic of many Japanese films today in the crime genre. The film spun off an animated series and a sequel, and a live action film is in production by Warner Bros.



**Neon Genesis: Evangelion** from Gainax studios is possibly one of the strangest of the anime films yet one of the best received. NeoTokyo is menaced by periodic arrivals of strange hostile beings called “angels”. NERV, the organisation set up to fight them, relies on its huge mecha called Evangelions or EVAs for short. These, for reasons never adequately explained, must be piloted by teenagers. It is unusual in that the anime came first, followed by the manga series – the opposite of the usual arrangement. Director Mamoru Oshii made a series that was as much spiritual and symbolic as conventional anime. Evangelion is widely regarded as one of the best and most influential anime film series ever released.

Each character is developed further in each episode, especially young Shinji who becomes the main protagonist. His father is the inventor of the Evangelions but Shinji has trouble understanding why he must keep risking his life instead of adults. So do the viewers. He seems to be forming an attachment to Rei, a young seriously depressed girl who is also an EVA pilot. Ultimately 26 TV episodes were made, and







once again SBS in Australia was game enough to show them. The series rapidly gained cult status.

In an attempt to finalise the series two alternate endings were tried, then finally combined into a single film. This only served to further confuse the audiences. To add to the confusion Gainax announced in 1996 that Oshii would rebuild the series into a set of four films called *Rebuild of Evangelion*, of which only two have been released so far. This series would have yet another ending.

The series has also spawned a huge amount of fan fiction and artwork, often quite sexual in nature. A live-action version was announced in 2003 by the distributor ADV films. They hold the worldwide distribution rights except for Japan and Australia (where Madman has the rights).

**Ghost in the Shell:** Another Mamoru Oshii product, a science fiction – action film with more than a touch of philosophy. It is based on Masamune Shirow's manga and was released in 1996. It received international acclaim and in 2004 Oshii directed a sequel.



## Ponyo

**Ponyo:** This delightful film is at the other end of the anime spectrum from Evangelion. From Hayao Miyazaki, it is enchanting, magical and poetic. Hayao Miyazaki also gave us *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle*. Ponyo is a delicately made film and it could so easily have moved into a cloying and sentimental experience. Somehow Miyazaki contains the sentimentality. While the film is high on cuteness, it kept me watching right to the very end. The various characters and story elements are masterfully balanced to create what I believe will become a classic anime film.

The story is a mythic tale centred on Sosuke, a five year old boy who lives with his parents in a house by the sea. Sosuke finds what he believes to be a goldfish trapped in a jar and as he attempts to free her he cuts his finger. Ponyo licks the blood. She is not a normal fish but a fish spirit. After tasting human blood her magical powers accelerate, including the ability to move between the human and oceanic worlds.

Ponyo's father is not amused and wants her back home. He captures her and takes her back, but despite his good intentions she doesn't want to stay put and live in their bubble under the ocean. By the strength of her will she sprouts true arms and legs. This triggers an ecological crisis between the two worlds. The story continues with fascinating explorations of environmental issues, family conflict and the simple message that if you love someone you accept them as they are.

The animation is breathtaking, the detail in each scene is astounding and the depth of colour, texture and form make this a visual feast. What is so astounding is that Miyazaki created his work by hand and did not use CGI. Ponyo





stands out as a work of art from beginning to end.

### The Companies

With anime now around sixty percent of Japan's total film production their industry strongly reflects the popularity of the genre. By the 1990s the overseas sales were high enough for the era to be called Japanese Cinema's Second Golden Age. Now let's have a look at some of the major companies producing anime. An anime film is made in much the same way as a conventional film. A story is decided on, often based on a manga story, test characters are drawn (rather than cast), and a production crew assigned. The director will have overall control of the production process subject only to studio policies and style guides.

Studio Ghibli has been, since 1985, one of Japan's most successful anime producers. Their logo features Totoro (a forest spirit from *My Neighbour Totoro*). The founders were director Hayao Miyazaki and producer Toshio Suzuki. They had a long history of working together in film and TV. They mostly produce films by Miyazaki and distribute them through Toho in Japan and the Walt Disney company in the rest of the world.

Their successful films include *Princess Mononoke*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Grave of the Fireflies*, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds* and most recently the delightful story *Ponyo*. An extensive catalogue of Studio Ghibli releases in Australia is available at <http://www.madman.com.au/studioghibli/>.

The studio has won a number of major awards for their anime features.

Gainax Corporation: their biggest success was the *Neon Genesis: Evangelion* series already mentioned, and the films that spun off the series to explain the rather confused and obscure story

and flesh out more of the characters. They also produced *The Wings of Honneamise* and *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann* which I have not seen yet, but has received critical acclaim. Much of their work is overseen by director and co-founder Hideaki Anno. Most storylines are created in-house but their scope has widened lately. They are beginning to produce anime versions of manga.

Madhouse Ltd has some well-known Japanese shows to its credit but its main claim to fame is the classic fantasy story *Ninja Scroll*. Over the last decade they have taken on many experienced producers and a number of new young directors. TV work may remain their mainstay but we will see more feature films coming from the enlarged company.

Mushi Productions, from whom Madhouse got most of their initial staff, was an early rival to Toei Animation. Osamu Tezuka, their founder, is their main producer and under him the firm moved strongly into animation work for TV. The company produced *Astro Boy* (yes, they have been around that long), and *Kimba the White Lion*. They also produced the first X-rated anime film, *Cleopatra* (1970). The X rating was applied by the studio themselves and apparently didn't really reflect the film's content but was simply an attempt to gain notoriety. In 1973 the company went bankrupt but has since reformed under the name Studio Fantasia.





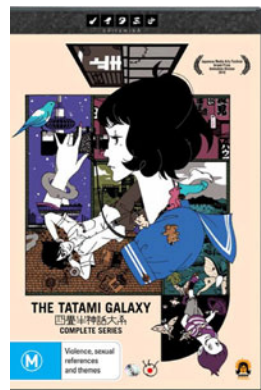


**The Tatami Galaxy**  
**Anime, Teenage Comedy**  
**Siren Visual**  
**R4 DVD**

*Japanese, English subtitles*

This TV series is undoubtedly the strangest piece of anime I have seen. The drawing technique of the Madhouse studio is crude and in-your-face, reminiscent of early pop art. The picture changes from one colour to another, the voices are delivered at a machinegun pace, and you will have to be a fast reader to follow the dialogue from the subtitles.

The story deals with the first two years in college of Watashi. He seems to be at college to find the "raven-haired beauty" of his dreams rather than to follow any academic pursuits. Each



episode is an alternative to the ones before (sort of parallel worlds). His main plan to meet girls is by joining the various "circles", or clubs. Although he does meet girls, at least one of whom is interested in him, his complete lack of social skills leads him to make a mess of his life. He is not helped by his best (only?) friend Ozu, a mischievous prankster who seems to delight in making his life a misery and tearing down what little ego he develops.

We could almost feel sorry for Watashi if he could only stop feeling sorry for himself. He is a nice enough kid but must compete for self control against Ozu, his penis (called Johnny), and the old woman fortune teller who keeps telling him to seize the opportunity before him before taking him for increasing amounts of money.

There are many other questions left unanswered in the series. What is the significance of the mysterious ramen stand that seems to come and go at random? Who is the group that steals illegally parked bikes? Is the eighth year student known as Master Higuchi, who sometimes offers helpful advice to Watashi and describes himself as "a deity of matrimony", really a student or just a non-returner of library books? Will Watashi ever get a sensual gum massage from dental hygienist Ryoku?

There had better be a second series to answer these questions, because they just keep piling up.

At first I had trouble following just what was going on, but after a couple of episodes it all settled down and became a tragi-comic teenage college story. I kept hoping in vain that Watashi would just wake up to himself, but he is so set in his unattainable ambitions that he is doomed to failure.

In spite of this he seems to be the only really normal person in the college and I kept harbouring a faint hope that he would wake up to himself and make the most of his opportunities. It didn't happen, so have to hope for a second season and see if he sorts himself out.

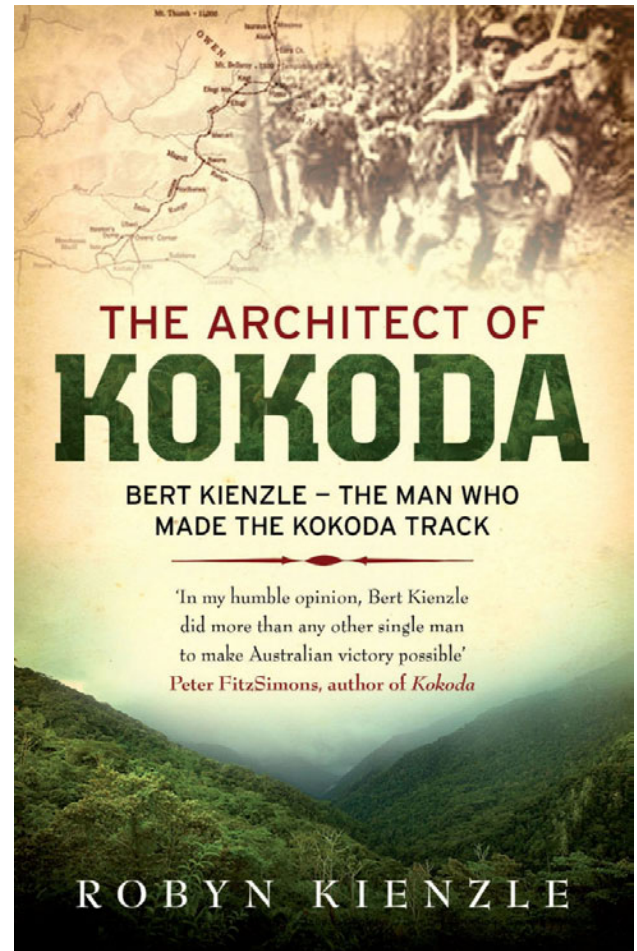


**The Architect of Kokoda**  
**Robyn Kienzle**  
**Hachette Australia (2011)**

The battles along the Kokoda Trail are fairly well documented but the general perception is that the trail was always there. As we see in this book, this is not correct. It is the story of Bert Kienzle, an unsung hero, written by his daughter-in-law. She has access to Bert's family papers and his war memoirs and her book gives us a deeply personal look at a remarkable man. As well as developing the Kokoda Trail to the point that it could handle large numbers of troops Bert organised many of the native carriers (known affectionately as the "fuzzy wuzzy angels"), built airstrips, and constructed field hospitals and rest camps along the Trail.

It was originally just an old mailman's track between some of the villages and a few footpads between villages. It started around Port Moresby and headed off into the interior. Various sections crossed the Owen Stanley mountain range, exposing users to its dreadful weather and other hazards. In places creek beds were a part of the network of tracks that worked around the worst obstacles to reach remote rubber and copra plantations and goldfields. One of these plantations was Bert's. He settled in an area of the Yodda Valley near a gap in the Owen Stanley Ranges close to the government outpost at Kokoda. He mined the area for gold, and used the profits to build a rubber plantation. It was served by the track system to Port Moresby as the trail to the north coast went through the territory of hostile natives who had only recently given up cannibalism. Everything was carried in or out by native carriers, who were treated well by Bert. He learned the native languages rather than use the more common "pidgin English". His plantation workers were well looked after. As well as regular supplies from Bert they supplemented their diet with food grown in small gardens attached to each of the natives' company-built houses. Bert's popularity as a good man was to stand him well in the war to come.

The development of the Territory was aided by the arrival of engineers to aid in the mining ventures, and by the introduction of aircraft and radio communications. A small airstrip was built at Kokoda but it was often out of use due to flooding. Bert then hacked out an airstrip at Yodda which was closer to his plantation and less often



out of service.

As the threat of war grew Australian military leaders made some bad decisions. Without consulting the men who lived and worked there, they assumed the Japanese would not be able to move along the Kokoda Trail because it was unsuitable for mechanised transport. Land troops could be cut off at what was inaccurately named the "Kokoda Gap". The "gap" was actually eleven miles wide and completely indefensible. Port Moresby was left unprotected against air attack as it was believed any attack would come from the sea. The same mistake was made by the British at Singapore.

A troop of soldiers was sent to the north coast to patrol for any enemy presence. They had great difficulty finding their way along the Trail. Bert was not conscripted, but was told to keep producing gold for the war effort. Other white people, including Bert's family, were evacuated. Finally Bert was told to close down the goldfields and make his way to Port Moresby. This was his first foot trip across the Owen Stanleys.



He found most of the old mailman's shelters and buildings on the trail were now in ruins. He and his "boys" had to hack their way through the growth on the old tracks. He passed through a number of places that were to feature in the New Guinea campaign – Alola, Kagi, Eora. At Port Moresby Bert was enlisted in the Citizens Military Force as a Warrant Officer. When a Japanese message was intercepted making it clear that they would invade across the Owen Stanleys, Macarthur's headquarters ignored it. New Guinea officers took the message more seriously. Bert was ordered to build a road from Post Moresby to Kokoda and given two months to do it. This ludicrous order was based apparently on what few maps were available, not the reality of the topography. Eventually eleven kilometres of road was made, constantly churned into mud and inadequate for anything bigger than a jeep.

Bert then went to Ilolo to build local roads. His rapport with the natives headed off a potential revolt and mass desertions. The next job was to escort a company led by Capt. Sam Templeton over the Trail to Kokoda. Their job was to protect a U.S. Engineers group who were to build an airstrip at Dobodura while the Japanese were regrouping at Rabaul. Bert was also encouraging local villagers to improve the trails in their areas.

Gradually the Kokoda Line of Communication as it was known was improved but many sections were still in poor repair. Again the load fell on the native porters. Templeton's small company alone needed 140 porters. The section from Kagi to Kokoda was the worst and would need a lot of work if it was to handle large troop movements. There was already a proposal to move 600 troops to Kokoda. Bert was setting up decent rest houses and food dumps along the Trail, but few native porters were coming through. He knew that airdrops were the only way to get enough supplies in.

The Japanese landed at Buna on the north coast and were faced only by the 60 men of Templeton's group. A signalling line was laid to Efogi at Bert's suggestion, speeding up communications. He returned to Port Moresby to pick up a force of 500 carriers to resupply the troops in the forward areas. This was his fourth traverse of the Trail. The Japanese took Kokoda

and the remaining troops fell back to Deniki. Air dropping of supplies was finally being tried but results at first were not good. The resupply still mostly consisted of Bert's carriers, who were now taking out wounded as well as bringing up food and ammunition. They simply couldn't carry enough.



There were two dry lakes near The Gap. Although the land was swampy in the middle, the smaller lakebed was a good spot for air drops. Bert named it Myola after the wife of one of his friends. The Myola dropping ground was later hailed as the saviour of the campaign. Bert cut a new track from Myola to the old Eora - Kagi track along the ridgeline. It met the track at a place Bert named Templeton's Crossing after Sam Templeton, who had lost his life in the earliest fighting. The new track cut the carry time to the front to three or four days and allowed a stockpile to be built up at Myola. Many carriers were now being used to move the wounded to the first aid post at Templeton's Crossing and thence to Port Moresby. Each wounded man took eight carriers. The carriers were perpetually cold, hungry and exhausted but still they kept going and their care of the wounded earned them a respected place in Australian history.

Bert felt the second, larger dry lake at Myola might be suitable for an airstrip. So it proved but the project was put on hold following a determined Japanese attack. Meanwhile Bert was bemoaning the loss of his house and all the mementoes at Yodda. The house had been looted by the Australians, smashed by the Japanese, and machinegunned by aircraft. As the Japanese steadily advanced against an under-trained Australian force Bert was warned that Myola may have to be evacuated. He cut an escape trail to Menari just in time for the soldiers to escape the Japanese advance.

Brigadier Potts was using strategic withdrawal along the Trail to lengthen the Japanese supply lines while allowing his own men time to resupply.

Unfortunately Australia's General Blamey wanted scapegoats for what he saw as a simple retreat. Potts lost his job. His replacement, Brigadier Porter, saw the logic of Potts' plan and continued the policy. Bert was kept busy talking to the porters and reducing the number of malingerers and potential deserters among the native carriers. Once again his credibility with the natives saved the day and improved the natives' morale.

Now it was the turn of the Japanese to suffer supply problems. They had only been issued with eleven days rations so most had to withdraw to Kokoda. Refreshed and reinforced Australian troops were now able to push the Japanese back, a move for which Macarthur and Blamey naturally took credit. After their terrible treatment by the Japanese many carriers were only too happy to serve with the Australian Army. This time the importance of airdrops was understood but it was still mismanaged from the top. In a controversial statement Robyn Kienzle says that Blamey ordered supplies dropped AHEAD of the troops to encourage them to hasten their advance. This meant that some supplies were dropped into enemy territory. Bert had an airstrip built on the big lake at Myola. It proved invaluable for the prompt delivery of essential supplies and much later for rapid evacuation of the wounded from the battles being fought around Templeton's Crossing. Macarthur and Blamey continued sending telegrams complaining about the slowness of the advance. As the Japanese were pushed back Bert was sent back to Yodda to get the rubber plantations, now taken over by the government, back into production.

Finally Bert's declining health led to him being hospitalised and sent back to Sydney where his family was waiting for him. His war was over. He was awarded an MBE for his work and was demobilised with the rank of Captain. His home at Yodda had been completely destroyed so he set about rebuilding. His family could come home at last. Even then his problems were not over. The price of rubber was fixed at so low a level that it was only marginally profitable. This was resolved finally when the Korean War began and rubber for truck tyres once again was in demand. Synthetic rubber had proved unreliable and costly to work.

His next problem was when the Australian gov-

ernment decided that Papua New Guinea should become independent. The position of the white population was in doubt although the new country still didn't have the policemen, administrators, planters or

doctors it would need. There was talk of nationalising the rubber and copra plantations. Seeing the troubles to come, Bert sold his plantation to the Development Bank for a tenth of its value and retired to Australia.

Robyn Kienzle raises a number of interesting points. The Kokoda Trail was Bert's preferred name rather than Track. It was not a single track but a network of tracks and footpads that evolved to meet the needs of the military and the natives. Bits had been added to work around difficult areas and to move the Trail to higher ground and out of the enervating jungle. When the Trail was opened to the growing tourist industry Bert, the man who knew the Trail best, was not consulted. As a result some of the new Trail is not the section walked by the exhausted troops.

Bert was always concerned with the welfare of the natives and even tried to have a medal struck for each of the thousands of carriers in recognition of their work. He arranged (and partly paid for) a number of memorials to these brave men. He even arranged a memorial at Kokoda to the Japanese who had died along the Trail. Not all plantation owners were as compassionate but Bert still had the respect and affection of his native workers. He is a part of Papua New Guinea's history as well as Australia's. Let us hope this book brings his work to greater recognition.



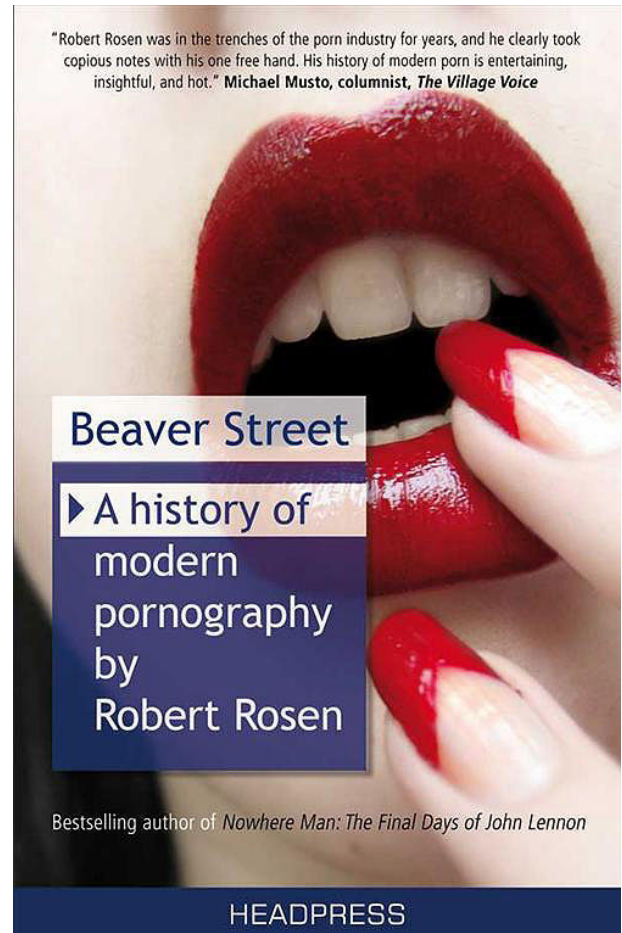


**Beaver Street:  
A History of Modern Pornography  
Robert Rosen  
Headpress (2011)**

Robert Rosen spent sixteen years in the porn industry from the period when phone sex began. He worked for many of the leading men's magazines under the name of Bobby Paradise and even made an appearance in a porn photo set. He met most of the people who were big in the industry, both actors and publishers, and kept copious notes on the industry and his part in it.

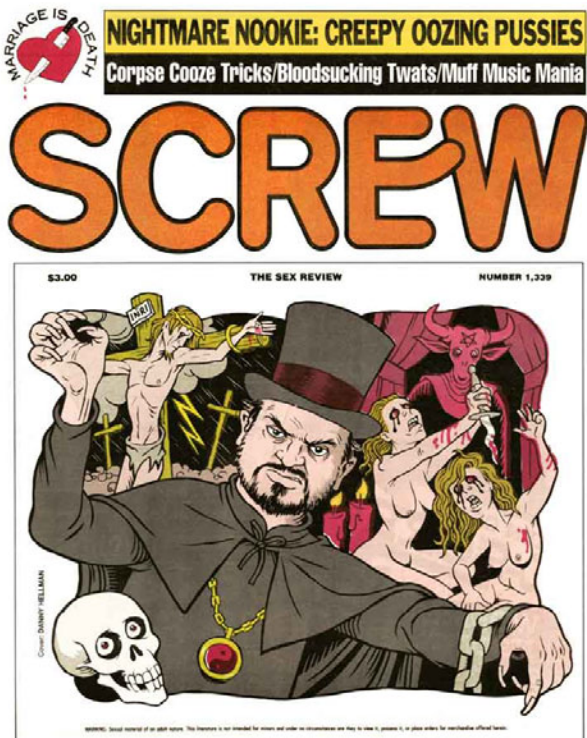
When the Bell telephone group was broken up the companies could become carriers of other peoples' information or providers of content. When Bell divested itself of the phone infrastructure for Dial-a-Prayer, Dial-a-Joke and others a quick thinking publisher, Chip Goodman, bought one of the massive call handling systems and set it up for phone sex. It worked brilliantly and the phone sex lines were the main profit makers of many publishers from then on. One of Rosen's first tasks for High Society magazine was to write scripts to be voiced by the actresses, then played on the sex lines.

He had a gift for writing what the publishers and editors wanted to see. At this point people could still read and a gentlemen's magazine would have "articles" – beautifully illustrated sort-of adventure fantasy stories which would inevitably lead to removal of clothing and getting down and dirty. There was a certain amount of taste involved, as one of the magazines' biggest sales points was Canada. It had more serious (and ever-changing) censorship laws. Thus it was OK in Canada to show a penis within a millimetre of a vagina, as long as there was a defi-



nite gap and no penetration was actually pictured. Anything too risqué was blotted out with a large black dot. This was reminiscent of the Japanese laws that genitals were not to be shown but all sorts of rape, bondage and transgressive acts were OK. In Japan genitals were hidden by strategically-placed vases of flowers. The magazines Rosen worked for showed genitalia but were more soft-core than, say, Screw, which was regarded as the lowest of lowbrow. Rosen's pay was not great but he needed the job and was capable of turning out large amounts of work.

As he moved further up in the industry he showed some doubts that this is what he really wanted to do, but it paid the bills. He is non-judgmental about pornography – as he points out, it has been around since a Cro-Magnon man painted a man and a woman on the wall of a cave in the Lascaux area having sex. He also points out that the industry has driven a lot of technical innovation – publishing, photography (movie porn started with Thomas Edison, according to Rosen), phone sex, internet, and others. There is a fascinating short chapter at the end of the book about the history.



Throughout the book we can see his changing attitudes in little ways – “intercourse” becomes simply “fucking”, for instance. He obviously adapted well to the industry and its standards. He compares the standards of magazines like Swank and High Society with the crass exploitation of Hustler and Screw. They had less use for writers, more for photographers, and of course a never-ending stream of models.

Rosen includes many little anecdotes in the story that make it more human than just a dull history:

“How about an article on techniques to improve your masturbation?” I suggested. “Absolutely not” said Badner. “Our readers are already masturbation experts. They don’t want to be reminded”.

There was opposition to the magazines and initially it was directed at their most profitable area – the phone sex lines. Parents in Utah sued the magazine for damaging their children’s “values and character” and causing long term damage that would require (expensive) psychiatric help for years. Generally such cases were simply ignored by the industry. There was also little love lost between the competing magazines. Each had staked out a territory with a particular



type of porn and that was how it should stay.

Some journalists and other staff managed to escape the porn trap and pursue other careers. Mario Puzo wrote The Godfather. Chip Goodman’s father had set up Marvel Comics as well as some early men’s magazines. Being a “pornographer” was just too lucrative compared with sporadic work as, say, an actor. It didn’t stop the dreams though. One of Rosen’s office co-writers and a part-time actor asked him

“Do you know what I’d like to do, even though it means I’d never work again as a legitimate ac-







tor? I'd like to pose in full Nazi uniform shaving a girl's head and pussy with a straight-edged razor". "Ah", I replied. "Beaver Barbers of the Third Reich".

We can see that Rosen was now well entrenched in the job and its required way of thinking.

He seems to have had a certain admiration for actor Ron Jeremy. I always wondered why this short, fat, hairy actor should be so popular with directors. Rosen explains that apart from having a twelve-inch penis and being able to ejaculate pretty much on command Ron had "a preternatural habit for painlessly indoctrinating "virgin" starlets into the pleasures of anal sex". The other actors who succeeded like this were known as the Nasty Nine and were the big names in the porn industry, never out of work for long. Many would-be actors, though, couldn't handle the work in front of a crew, cameras and lights and failed miserably.

Who did this sort of work? Rosen gives an insight - "people become porn stars because they're good at it; because they have no other options; because they have nothing to lose; or

because they're desperate, either economically or emotionally or both". He could probably have said the same about himself.

Around 1977 Rosen noted a change in tactics by the quality magazines. They were losing money to the sleazy "split beaver" porno mags and they decided if you can't lick 'em, join 'em. Quality dropped, the stories disappeared, and the magazines were now filled with sleaze. Although Rosen seems to have felt no shame about it Chip Goodman, the publisher, tried to distance himself from the industry. As managing editor of For Adults Only Rosen had to work on a magazine that gave its readers "lesbian sphincter frenzies, older women who "face sit for charity", young nymphs "who sleep with buttplugs", men who orgasm while watching women anally expel glass eyeballs" and so on. Rosen says they "trod a fine line between arousing and sickening".

The latest bit of nonsense from Canada at this time was a ban on armpit fucking, because it was degrading. It seems to have been an idea that the Americans hadn't even thought of. They were too busy exploring incest in articles like "Yo Mama's Pussy and Other Family Favorites".







There was a new range of young starlets emerging to meet the industry's insatiable demand for fresh flesh. Dancers would do a couple of videos, get a boob job on the proceeds, and then go on tour as strippers or dancers and use their movie fame and their boobs to make huge money. For many it was their only way out of poverty. One succeeded beyond her wildest dreams, but brought low many people in the industry when the scandal of underage porn actresses broke. Her name was Traci Lords.

Rosen tracks her career as witnessed by the people who knew her. A victim of sexual abuse from the age of 10, Traci worked her way from dancing to porn (while she was still underage), to legitimate film work and even a hit record. Very few have been able to duplicate this.

Various governments and pressure groups had been trying to have the porn videos and magazines banned, but each time they were defeated by the First Amendment. President Lyndon Johnson, to relieve the pressure on himself from the Vietnam War, started a commission of enquiry into the industry. They worked at a leisurely pace and the Presidency was eventually won by Richard Nixon while the commission was still deliberating. Nixon nobbled the enquiry by ap-

pointing a radical Christian and founder of the Citizens For Decency movement to the board. The final report said basically that the more people watched porn the more they became inured to it, and it was harmless. Nixon's nominee presented a different more rabid attitude and Nixon rejected the report..

Nixon was soon caught up in the Watergate scandal and took any opportunity to divert attention. One opportunity was the release of Deep Throat, which was promptly banned in many states on obscenity grounds. It didn't work and many people just watched the film and decided it wasn't so bad, and spoke up in its defence – including a number of prominent actors and actresses. A flood of similar films followed, but the groundwork had been laid for the anti-porn movement. They got their chance under Ronald Reagan. His friend, fundamentalist Christian Edward Meese, set out to destroy the industry. Once again he ran foul of the First Amendment but started working in other directions. Discrimination against women and racketeering laws were widened. Threats were made against large chain stores that sold men's magazines, threatening Federal prosecution. A new committee was formed and their report,







“Not surprisingly, .... described a pornographic universe consisting almost exclusively of violent sex, child sex and animal sex ....”

Rosen believed at first that it would all blow over, especially when Meese was revealed as having a major role in the Iran-Contra scandal. It didn't. On her eighteenth birthday Traci Lords confessed that she had been fifteen when she made her first porno film. That meant that possession of any of Traci Lords' videos or photo shoots would make the holder guilty of having child pornography. Swank magazine, where Rosen currently worked, went into a frenzy of destruction of any Lords material and frantically set about removing any mention of her from the forthcoming issues.

Lords had used fake birth certificates to get false drivers licenses for ID. Her model releases in which she affirmed she was over 18 used false names. Rosen believes she deliberately set up the porn industry to further her career, and did very well out of it in a deal with Aaron Spelling to make a film of her life.

The episode gave the anti-porn crusaders the excuse they wanted to make inroads into the industry. This time they used the guise of the Child Protection Act. Lords was never charged with any crime, and Rosen believes she was being used by the Justice Department to set up the industry. She in turn may have been using the DoJ as well as the industry to set up her fu-

ture career. Chip Goodman's reaction however was to fill each issue with as many young-looking girls as possible, all carefully vetted for age. His magazines, like all the others, reached new sales heights on the strength of the DoJ free publicity. Of all the people charged over the scandal only one was ever convicted, and that under the Racketeering Act. All other cases were dismissed or the defendants found Not Guilty by the juries. Perhaps there are some sensible people in the U.S. after all, people who do not believe they have a right to impose their opinions on others. Many of the cases were fought on the basis that Traci Lords, although a minor, was not the victim she purported to be. Rosen believes that in the end all she did was give the industry a new concept to exploit – the “barely legal” teen girl.

Two new factors entered the picture, both of which were predicted to wipe out porn. AIDS was on the rise and unprotected sex was now portrayed officially as dangerous. Rosen quotes an Alabama Pentecostal mailout that asserted “Only Jesus can save you from the scourge of AIDS. And if you don't take him into your heart today you're going to die alone and in agony, before being banished to burn for eternity in the Lake of Fire”.





Rosen was then assigned to edit D-Cup, a new sleaze magazine. As he studied the competition he realised just how acclimatised he had become. His publisher complained that Rosen's models were too attractive. He wanted ugly or at least homely women, provided they had huge breasts. Rosen complied and turned D-Cup into a high seller but after twelve years in the job he began to wonder how much longer he could take it. The pressure was on when the flood of photos of British models started to arrive. Like their American counterparts they just wanted to pick up some easy money. Most were unsuitable for the new British Page 3 Girl format, but many did more provocative photo sets for the American market.

The other factor was the growth of porn on the Internet. There was a huge resource there and it was readily available on a paid access basis. It was phone sex all over again. The Internet was also beyond the control of government. After a while every aspiring starlet had her own web page and the supply of models for the magazines began to dry up. Some magazines moved into cyberspace but their profits here didn't cover the shrinking profits on the magazines. The magazine industry collapsed.

Rosen finally gave up in 1999 to concentrate on a John Lennon biography.

This book is his "investigative memoir" of those times. That he can still write such a detailed and highly readable book after 192 months of sheer smut says a lot for his abilities, considering he often wondered what he had become under his long exposure to the industry. The book is funny, sad, disgusting and hopeful in equal measures. It is only lightly illustrated with collages of magazine covers, but it's enough to give you the general idea. The porn magazine industry was worth billions at its height and he was not only there to see it, he took an active role in it and made a good living from it. He still manages to remain fairly non-judgmental about it and although he gives the governments and the anti-porn activists a serve he manages to do so without any overt hatred. His insights show he learned a lot during the period and now he passes his knowledge on in this book.

**The Durham Forces in the Field 1914-18**  
**By Capt. Wilfrid Miles**  
**Naval and Military Press (2011)**

The Durham Light Infantry was formed in 1881 and continued on the strength of the British Army until 1968 when it was finally disbanded. Eleven service battalions that served overseas were raised in County Durham in response to Lord Kitchener's plea for more troops for his New Army. Other battalions remained at home training new recruits and providing reserves for the battalions in combat. The battalions served on the Western Front and some went on to service in Italy.

A peculiarity of these battalions is that they were named the "Bantam Battalions", probably because their height requirement was set at 5 feet to 5 feet 3 inches, below the British Army's minimum of 5 feet 4 inches. At the time the diet of the average working man was fairly basic and their height suffered. Allowing them to join a battalion with a lower height requirement gave the British a far larger range of men to draw on. It also improved the condition of many of the men. For the first time they got three decent meals a day and a place to sleep.

The book does not follow the history of each battalion, rather it follows the history of the war and the battalions' place in it. Durhams fought in most of the major battles of the Western Front including Loos, the Somme, Arras, Messines, Ypres, Passchendaele, Amiens and

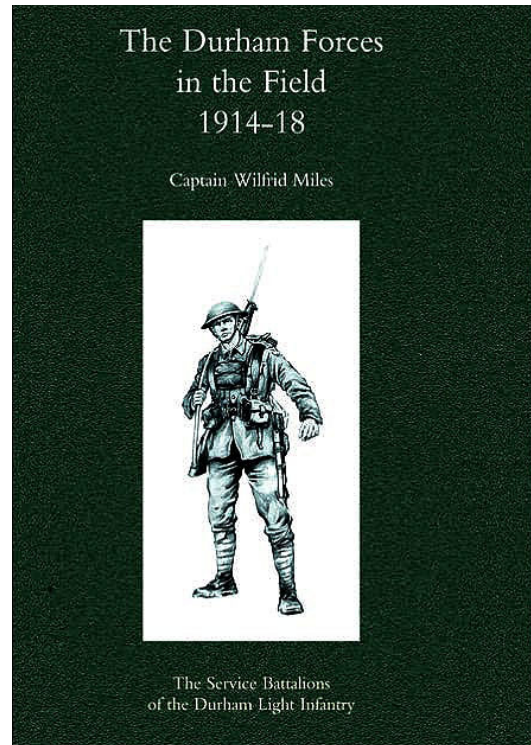


Cambrai. With a presence in so many battles it is no wonder that the list of decorated men is so long. So is the list of casualties. Factual descriptions of some of the major battles provide good examples of the state of warfare at the time.

The book is more oriented to the military researcher than the casual reader but Capt. Miles' descriptions do a good job of portraying the difficulties facing the ordinary soldier. Mud was only part of the problem. Disease, irregular rations, gas, air attack and a well-prepared enemy also afflicted them. Even being withdrawn from the front lines seemed to mean constant calls for working parties to mend roads and railway building. Many of the rest camps do not seem to have been much better than the trenches. There were few popular rest spots and little chance that they would be sent there. Even being withdrawn from the front lines to the reserve trenches had its own dangers. The Germans guns would lob gas shells into the reserve areas from time to time, catching the resting troops less prepared.

The battles mostly occurred in the standard British way. They started with a softening-up artillery barrage that rarely worked against the well dug-in Germans. As soon as the barrage lifted the infantry would go on the long slog across the churned up ground of No Mans Land, cutting their way through the barbed wire as they went. All the while they would be under heavy machinegun fire from the Germans. An attack was a slaughter that they could only retaliate against when they entered a German forward trench and began hand-to-hand fighting. There were a number of valiant smaller actions fought as well, and the troops seemed well able to carry these out with less loss of life. Taking out a machine gun hidden in a copse of trees was a different matter to trench warfare.

We also learn much about the weaponry carried by a soldier of the times, among them the "bomb" (early grenades, popular with the foot soldier in trench warfare) and signal rockets to make up for the poor communications of headquarters with the advancing troops. Firing a red rocket, for instance, would signal a lost objective and artillery fire would then rain down on the abandoned position to harass the advancing Germans. We also learn of the horrors of being injured in battle – one soldier won his VC when he rescued a wounded comrade who had been



stuck in a shell crater for four and a half days without medical attention or water. There are many such incidents noted throughout the book. Bravery was not in short supply among the men or the officers.

When the Western Front finally drew to a close with the Armistice, two battalions of the Durhams were sent to Italy. Their advance against the Italians was slow but less of a battle than the trench warfare they came from.

Each battle is described in detail with the objectives and terrain discussed. At the end of each battle there is a list of those killed and details of awards issued. There are many relevant maps in each chapter and a final group of larger scale maps in the index. Unfortunately these last maps are not very clear due to the limits of the printing process. Another index allows us to find every reference in the book to an individual battalion.

As noted the book is intended as more of a history and a research book than a good read, but if you are prepared to read it thoroughly it is a comprehensive description of the battalions and their men.

# Interview

## Hexed: A brief interview with Kevin Hearne

*You have chosen to set your story in the newer urban fantasy style rather than traditional fantasy. This seems to be largely aimed at teenagers (Twilight, etc) but you have come up with a story that has great adult appeal as well. Are there advantages for a writer in the urban fantasy genre, or do you feel that conventional fantasy is becoming a bit tired?*

I think there are great opportunities in urban fantasy; we have only scratched the surface of what's possible. Since the hugely successful series tend to involve vampires and werewolves, editors are seeing lots of manuscripts along those lines, but there's no reason for that to be the case when there is an entire world's worth of myth and folklore to update for the modern day. Conventional fantasy is still evolving, I think. I point to George R.R. Martin's work, Joe Abercrombie's, and the excellent novels of Patrick Rothfuss. Additional names available upon request!

*Atticus is a more well-developed character than we usually see in this sort of story. How much of him is you?*

I suppose much of his voice might be mine, but certain aspects of his character are quite the opposite. I do not kick ass, for example, nor do I sport a single tattoo. Sadly, I am not eternally youthful, nor do I own an Irish wolfhound with which I can communicate telepathically. I rather like trees, though. And marshmallows. That should count for something.

*You manage to juggle a lot of plotlines in the one story. Are these going to be resolved eventually or are the multiple problems going to keep haunting Atticus?*

Everything (or most everything) will be resolved eventually; this series does have an end. Some of the problems will get solved early, but others will most likely show up as a result.

*A clan of werewolves and a vampire as lawyers. Are you trying to tell us something here?*

Apart from being a bit of a joke, this actually made a lot of sense to me in practical terms. If you're a nasty critter that's trying to blend in to society, then you're going to need to move around and switch identities every so often, set up new bank accounts and so on. Lawyers can help you accomplish that, because no one questions them when they start doing things through power of attorney.

*Are you going to develop Oberon past the sausage-eating stage? Is there a potential hero there?*

Sausage-eating is not a stage for hounds; it's a lifetime condition. But I think Oberon has plenty of potential, and there's nothing more fun for me to write than his little asides.

*Sexy Celtic goddesses, sexy witches and Atticus' sexy apprentice Granuaile – is he going to have women problems on top of his present problems? I hope Druids weren't celibate.*

No, Druids weren't celibate at all. They had rather a good time at certain festivals, as a matter of fact. Sexuality was nothing to be afraid of in many pagan traditions, and that may be why later religions cloaked that aspect of our natures in sin—it was too attractive otherwise. But for Atticus, yes, you could say he'll have a few relationship issues along the way.

*Have you outlined the rest of the series yet, or are you just seeing where it goes?*

I've currently outlined through book six and I'm finishing up book four now—past that, we'll see.



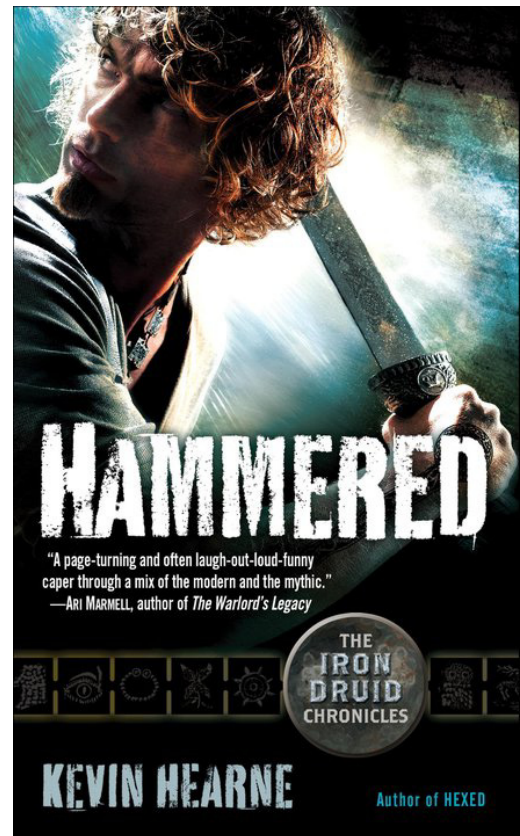
**Hammered**  
**Kevin Hearne**  
**Harper Voyager (2011)**

This is third novel in Kevin Hearne's imaginative series, and as usual Atticus O'Sullivan, the last surviving Druid, is in trouble. In the previous novel *Hexed* he rather foolishly promised a local sorceress that he would get a golden apple for her from the garden of one of the gods in return for her help. Now he is called on to keep his promise.

Through his power of being able to jump between the various planes of existence he is able to enter Asgard, the plane of the Norse gods. He is able to recover an apple but to do so he has had to seriously upset Thor, god of thunder. Now his friend Leif Helgarson, a vampire, reveals he has a grudge against Thor and asks Atticus to take him to Asgard so he can carry out his revenge. This runs against Atticus' personal motto that has done him good for centuries – stay away from the guy with the lightning bolts.

He is warned by various deities, including his drinking buddy Jesus, that killing Thor may cause worldwide problems in the future. "Things are already looking grim for you, my friend. You've unleashed a significant aspect of Fate". There is a power struggle going on among the local werewolf clans, as well as a turf war with a clan from Florida. His lawyer is head of the local clan and in spite of the mounting problems he also has a score to settle with Thor, and wants to go with them. Friendship wins out but Atticus knows that if he survives he will have to leave his comfortable existence in Tempe, Arizona and find a new home to stay ahead of the other gods who will surely be after him. Oh, and he is also being hunted by a band of loonie Jewish demon-killers.

More and more people attach themselves to Atticus' war party and before they enter Asgard they tell their stories. Thor is not the great hero that the stories make him out to be. He is a spoiled bully who thinks nothing of killing innocent people and ruining lives. Each member of the party has a good reason for killing Thor. There is even another thunder god who was tricked by Thor into losing his people's



belief in him, leaving Thor as THE thunder god. Many have been waiting for thousands of years to get their chance. Atticus now offers that chance, since he knows a back door into Asgard that is not guarded. The usual entry across the bridge Bifrost is well guarded and is not an option for a war party.

Thor has a number of friends and sycophants among the minor gods. They will also be in the battle. The battle is savage but eventually successful, but Atticus has now drawn a lot of attention to himself and pissed off many gods. He still has a lot of people back home who are after him as well. Life is complicated for a Druid.

Kevin Hearne once again gives us many examples of Atticus' irreverent humour, his loyalty to his friends and an explanation of the powers of a Druid. His gods are not the characters of mythology but a self-serving bunch of supernatural thugs. "The function of assholes in the world, just like the asshole we all have, is to spread the shit around".

This original approach makes his books a refreshing and often humorous read, and *Hammered* is no exception.

**Hexed**  
**Kevin Hearne**  
**Harper Voyager (2011)**

Hexed is an entrant in the newish genre of Urban Fantasy, in which old-style characters like werewolves and vampires are brought into the modern world. The genre has appeal to teenagers particularly – something about having these supercool powers, knowing you have them, but keeping them hidden from others. We see a similar feel in the teenager superhero films and novels. Some live up to their promise and become a good story, others are becoming clichéd. Hexed is a highly detailed story that doesn't stray too much into cliché. It still has a slight teenager look but is a top read for adults as well.

Atticus O'Sullivan is a Druid, the last survivor of the Church's pogrom against all spiritual leaders except their own. He is very much an earth spirit, drawing his strength from the earth and feeling an obligation to heal the land wherever it has been damaged. He has a range of magical powers available to him, but as befits a Druid he does not have a single killing spell. For that he has a very powerful sword.

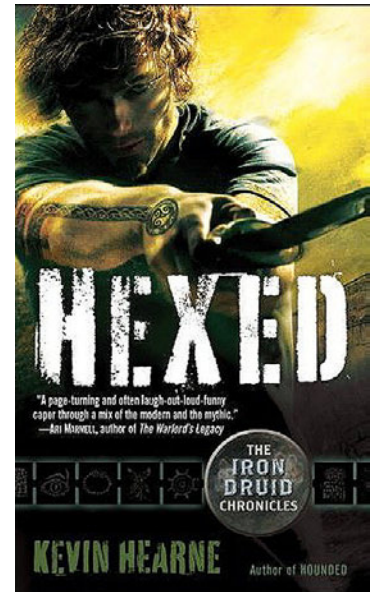
Things are restless in the supernatural plane. Atticus has had to kill one of the leading gods who threatened to release the demons into the world. The killing has made him a target for the rest of the gods. They either want to kill him in revenge or they want him to assassinate more gods for them. Supernatural politics are becoming interesting.

Atticus lives in Tempe, Arizona, a small American city where he runs a bookstore specialising in the occult, and he does herbalist work as



well. Although he is still young (in human terms) he is 2100 years old due to an anti-aging potion he can make. He is regarded as a bit of a harmless eccentric by the townspeople.

This impression is reinforced as he pedals around town with his huge sword strapped to his back



He is not the only supernatural in town. The local Indians have their own spirit, there is a coven of witches living in town, his solicitor is a werewolf from the local pack and the junior solicitor is a vampire. The town has its own population of ghouls and other creatures, but is generally quiet. The witches are his biggest problem – traditionally druids and witches do not get on - and he is about to sign a non-aggression pact with them, so all seems well.

Then a new coven begins to move into town. They are a nasty bunch who were on Hitler's side during World War II and now they are after Atticus. There are two strangers dressed as a rabbi and a priest who are also taking an interest in him. A fallen angel is eating kids at the local school. Two randy Celtic goddesses are competing for power and both want his body. At least they don't want it dead – yet.

Atticus is left to try to organise resistance against the new coven and sort out the other newcomers. He will get some help from the locals but his powers are better suited to mass slaughter. He is involuntarily helped in this by his suspicious next door neighbour who is an arms dealer.

There is a lot going on throughout the book, which is fast-paced all the way. It only slows a little to explain the different powers and spells of the protagonists and this just gives us a better understanding of the story rather than slow it down much. There are even touches of humour, especially when Atticus is talking tele-



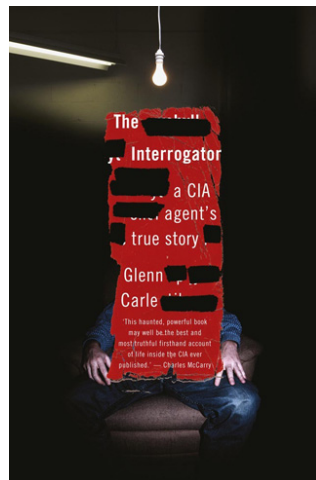
pathically to his hound, Oberon. Oberon is not much of a fighter but will defend Atticus to the death if he should be attacked by a chicken-and-apple sausage.

The mythology in the book tends to be very Irish-based and perhaps seeing mentions of characters from Irish folklore is meant to put us at our ease. This doesn't work, though, as a more treacherous and power-hungry mob of self-servers is hard to imagine.

Hexed is part of a planned six-novel series and much of the story refers back to the first novel, Hounded. This is skilfully handled so we do not need those interminable "what happened before ..." stories. Hearne fills in the gaps for us as needed, so the story doesn't slow down. The bits and pieces of information he doles out not only bring us up to date but help us picture the characters better. I wish I had been able to start with Volume 1, but it's now on my "To Buy" list. The others will join it as fast as they come out.

**The Interrogator –  
a CIA Agent's True Story**  
**Glenn Carle**  
**Scribe Publications**  
**(2011)**

*This is the never-before-told story of the 'dark side' of the Bush administration's war on terror, and of one of the CIA's biggest failures — the kidnapping, rendition, and torture of the wrong man — as told by a person who conducted the interrogation. It is an indictment of the CIA's enhanced interrogation from the inside, from a very senior operative. It is also the story of a patriot — Glenn Carle — and his struggle to do the right thing. And, of course, to some of his ex-colleagues he is regarded as a traitor for revealing the truth.*



Glenn Carle's book charts his 23-year career as a CIA officer, especially in the period just before and after 9/11. He describes thoroughly the paranoia that reached a fever pitch in the top administration of the U.S. and what it meant to



the lower level CIA spooks.

Carle had some experience already as a spook in a war zone, with the Contra – Sandinista operations in Nicaragua and in Costa Rica. On his second posting he served a period seeing to CIA interests after the Bosnian conflict.

He turned down a longer slot in Bosnia because he had a wife and children back home. His time meanwhile was mostly spent getting to know the internal CIA routines, the slow plodding work of information gathering and verification.

His first major case solo was while he was working in the Counter Terrorism Group. He was assigned the interrogation of an al-Qa'ida (his spelling) suspect. In the peculiar parlance of the CIA, "suspect" was a word that pretty much meant "guilty" so it was changed to "detainee". Even "interrogation" was later softened to the more innocent-sounding "interview". So the prisoner, as an HVT ("high value target") coded as CAPTUS, was "rendered" (kidnapped) from a Middle East

country, and “interviewed”. All nice and harmless and neutral-sounding.

Carle operated under the methods laid down in the KUBARK manual, the standard CIA work on interviewing a detainee. The CIA did not, as laid down in the manual, torture its prisoners. Unfortunately the host country’s security forces had no qualms and the CIA officer was warned that there were times when he would simply have to stand up and leave the room. Torture was disguised by calling it “EIT” – Enhanced Interrogation Techniques – and so far it had always been done by the host nation. See no evil.

KUBARK, however, was being overridden by Bush’s Presidential directive to track down bin Laden at any cost and by any means. This was carefully left undefined but torture was now clearly on the menu. Carle was expected to comply. When he queried the new instructions he was simply asked “Which flag do you serve?”

This question became increasingly relevant as Carle began to wonder if CAPTUS was really the important al-Qa’ida agent he was made out to be. The CIA attitude however became increasingly strident, echoing that of the President and his yes-men like Cheney and Rumsfeld. A detainee who said he didn’t know the answer to a question just needed more pressure.

Carle’s belief was that “Torture is simple, crude, obtuse and immoral and does not work. It is patently stupid, an offence to any understanding of how a mind works.”

With some questions still unanswered by CAPTUS (the possibility that he didn’t have the answers was not considered) the order came through to move him to “Hotel California”, a harsh regime prison (probably in Afghanistan) where Enhanced Interrogation Techniques (read: Torture) would soon bring out the wanted information. Carle was transferred with him. Here he found some of the beginnings of physical torture – cold rooms, minimal space, verbal abuse, loud background noise, all designed to disorient the detainee who had no idea where he now was. The book contains an extensive list of the techniques used.

While individually they do not comprise torture, cumulatively that was the effect. Carle was becoming more and more convinced that CAPTUS

was at best a low level al-Qa’ida operative, not the terrorist leader that the higher-ups were convinced he was. Just before Carle left Hotel California to go on leave he wrote a series of cables rubbing the belief that CAPTUS was an al-Qa’ida operative and recommending his release along with some other detainees whose cases Carle had worked on. This was a career-threatening move because all the higher-ups wanted so desperately to believe that CAPTUS’ rendering was a major blow to the terrorists. There could be no admission that they were wrong. The cables simply disappeared.

Carle pinpoints the source of the problem quite credibly. After 9/11 the intelligence community was blamed for its failure to predict and negate such an attack. After this all terrorist reports, no matter how minor, were fed to the bureaucrats who saw the flood of information and assumed the U.S. was now under heavy attack. This became the standard mantra of Government and the “War on Terror” began. With so much information supporting this policy, the occasional negative information was simply disregarded. Although the field men knew better their superiors kept supporting this view. So we had weapons of mass destruction and a Global Terrorist linkup.

There was a desperate drive to support these theories. Al-Qa’ida was really a minor organisation but was given undue prominence and supporting evidence was actively sought. Its footprints could be found anywhere if you looked carefully and interpreted the evidence correctly. CAPTUS was just one example of this.

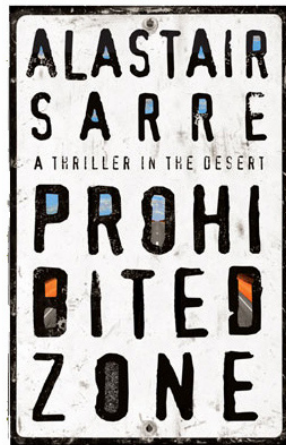
The GWT was used as an excuse for torture (despite America being a signatory to anti-torture conventions), kidnapping and atrocities like indefinite detention in Guantanamo Bay. The abuses were carefully wrapped in legal interpretations.

Much of the book has been redacted (erased) by the CIA’s Publications Review Board but there is sufficient information left in to demonstrate how many field staff felt about the issues. Hopefully the book will awaken some feelings of guilt among the U.S. population, who were ultimately responsible for the election of the people in power.



**Prohibited Zone**  
**Alastair Sarre**  
**Wakefield Press**  
**(2011)**

Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 the world went into a frenzy of anti-terrorist propaganda. People were labelled “terrorists” with little or no proof, or even concrete evidence. Australia did not escape the paranoia. Then as now Australia was experiencing a flood of “boat people” fleeing the violence of countries like Afghanistan.. At the time in which Sarre sets this novel the Taliban is still in charge of Afghanistan and is imposing its version of Islam on the people. Those young men who were conscripted by the Taliban, especially those trained in Osama bin Laden’s camps, were automatically classed as terrorists. In Australia a nervous government is putting all illegal immigrants into Detention Camps until their bona fides can be ascertained. Some have been in the camps for years. Does this all sound familiar? It should. It is still going on today.



One of the worst camps is Woomera, the old weapons testing area in the South Australian desert. Conditions are crude and inmates are committing suicide and self-mutilation out of a sense of hopelessness. On the nastier side there are rumours of rape and beatings.

Steve West is a mining engineer at the Roxby Downs uranium mine. He had a brief spell of fame as a footballer until injury forced him from the game and now he is reasonably content with his new life. He knows a lot of people at the local pub, some of whom he classes as friends. He also is having an affair with a lady in Adelaide who is separated from her abusive husband.

On his way down south one evening for a dirty weekend with her he learns of a breakout of inmates from the Detention Camp. Inadvertently he becomes involved when he gives a lift to Kara, an anti-camp activist, and Saira, a Moslem girl who has been brutalised at the camp by one

of the guards. The police, the security people and a group of bounty-hunting guards are looking for the women. Saira’s boyfriend Amir has also escaped and the security people are particularly anxious to recapture him. He has trained in Osama bin Laden’s camps and has met bin Laden, so therefore by definition he must be a terrorist. If he is on the loose he must also be planning terrorist action so the government is in a panic to get him back into detention.

By helping the women Westie has now placed himself in the spotlight. He has also placed himself in danger from the less-ethical security people.

Sarre has given the novel a very Australian flavour with the swearing and goodnatured drunkenness of many typical Australians in bush areas. He highlights the divided opinions of Australians on the whole refugee question – some are tolerant, most have opinions formed by the media and the government. As the story develops we get explanations of many of the areas where opinions conflict, such as the ongoing fighting between the sects of Islam that is responsible for much of the refugee problem in the first place.

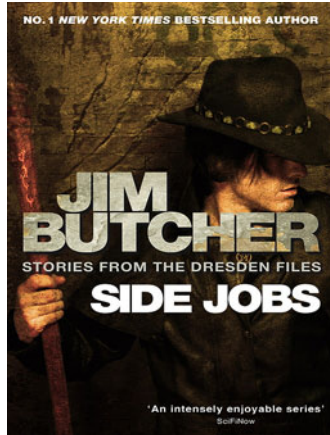
Sarre has an excellent eye for the desert country and, I suspect, more than a passing affection for it. He is writing of the area where he lived as a child and his familiarity with it shows through. ‘Dusk was falling soft on a land as hard as old bones and I had the road and the world and the whole damned universe to myself’. With characters named Chook, Baz and Spud he also shows a familiarity with the people. They are all described in appropriately Australian terminology that immediately lets us picture that character. “The first (cop) was about forty and had a medium build, short blond hair and a suit that looked like it had walked up from Adelaide”, or “as long as I can get the leg over the Missus about once a week I’m happy”.

The story evolves in a straightforward linear manner that makes it very easy to follow. We are therefore free to study the characters rather than try to integrate the flashbacks, so popular with writers and filmmakers, into the narrative.

This is Alastair Sarre’s first novel. I hope it won’t be his last.

**Side Jobs**  
**Jim Butcher**  
**Orbit Books (2011)**

Jim Butcher has written a whole series of novels and short stories under the generic name of The Dresden Files, based on the exploits of Private Investigator and Wizard Harry Dresden. This anthology includes many of the short stories from the series.



In the modern world we regard wizards, witches, vampires and so on as either raving loonies or legends from the past. This is not correct. They all exist in an uneasy peace that involves not letting the humans know of their existence. Most, like the witches and wizards and even werewolves, can coexist but every now and then one will set out for advantage in the strange politics of the underworld. This will usually involve the death of humans and in Chicago, where Harry is based, he will be expected to take matters in hand. The Chicago Police have a special squad for dealing with paranormal events but their main job is to cover up the real reasons and write a report that will suit the higher ups. Nevertheless they know Harry well, and there is a suggestion of a developing love interest between him and Murphy, the cute female officer in charge of the detail.

Because of the different forms of magic used by the assorted protagonists Harry's wizard magic is not always strong enough to get him out of trouble without serious injury.

The books read a lot like a back story for a role playing game in their collection of clues as to the whereabouts of the evil beings, then the fierce battle that will follow.

Unusually this does not detract from the stories in any way because Butcher paints Harry and his associates as serious personalities, not just figures collecting points. He also goes into some detail about the spells used and the underworld politics and this rounds out the stories nicely.

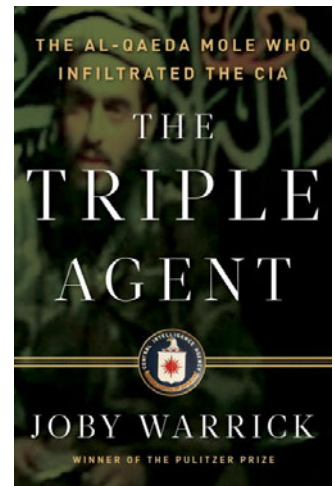
They were regarded as good enough to make

into a series for the Sci-Fi Channel as far back as 2007.

The book is an excellent read in the current urban fantasy genre. Don't let the mention of witches and wizards put you off – it's written in a way that makes them quite believable.

**The Triple Agent**  
**Joby Warrick**  
**Scribe Publications (2011)**

Following the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York the U.S. security organisations went into a frenzy of intelligence gathering using whatever means were available including torture. One of those weapons was to infiltrate agents into al-Qaeda and related organisations. This book is the story of one of those agents and the tragic outcome of his being forced into a role he was poorly equipped for.



Humam Khalil el-Balawi was a pediatrician working in Jordan. He came to the notice of their security services through his activities writing a blog on the internet in which he expressed his views and opinions of world events. He became well known for his pro-Islam, anti-U.S. writings on the Internet and was tracked down and arrested by Jordanian security in 2008. He suffered a basic level of torture but once the security forces were convinced he could not lead them to terrorists he was let go after a few weeks. Even so, he knew he would always be under some sort of observation for the rest of his life.

Jordan had its own problems with fundamental Moslems who wanted to depose the King and make the country an Islamic republic. It was decided to try to turn el-Balawi into an agent for Jordan and get him into the terrorist network as a believer. His writings would help in this, establishing his credibility. The CIA, who worked closely with Jordanian Security, agreed.





It was arranged that he would go to Turkey for a conference but would then just keep going to Pakistan to the western Tribal Areas. Here he would volunteer his services.

The ruse worked. He was accepted, albeit with some reservations, by the terrorists as a much-needed and loyal doctor. His information started to flow back. The terrorists at this time were divided. Power plays within a group were common both inside each group and with each other – al-Qaeda, the various Taliban groups and by the sound of it a few local warlords jockeying for power as well. El-Balawi passed back information on leaders and the command chains of the groups he worked in, and made the point that Osama bin-Ladin was keeping a low profile. Al-Qaeda was mostly being run by his second in command Ayman al-Zawahiri and el-Balawi was able to provide details of his chain of command. The U.S. launched their Predator “drones”, remotely-controlled planes, from airstrips in Afghanistan and the Predators cruised around until needed. They were used to attack each headquarters as they were identified and the attacks became intense and effective. The faint buzzing noise of a Predator overhead became part of the landscape, but many people kept an eye on the sky for the trails of the Hell-fire rockets that meant an attack was under way.

Warrick’s story widens to include the U.S. security staff at the Khost base, a CIA facility in Afghanistan near the Pakistan border. From Khost ground attacks could be authorised, informants supervised and signals monitored. The quality of el-Balawi’s information improved rapidly – too rapidly, and the first suspicions were voiced that he may have been “turned”. The CIA, unwilling to let go such a useful source of information, hid its reservations. To those in close contact with

the situation it was a case of “the eagerness of war-weary spies who saw a mirage and desperately wanted it to be real.”. El-Balawi finally asked for a meeting with his Jordanian “handler” in Peshawar to pass on valuable information about bin Laden’s health. This was too good to miss. Although el-Balawi insisted, the CIA and Ali bin Said, his Jordanian handler, insisted on the meeting taking place in Khost.

When the car finally arrived in the CIA compound and pulled up in front of the assembled dignitaries el-Balawi stepped from the car and detonated an explosive vest he was wearing. The blast killed or injured many of those assembled.

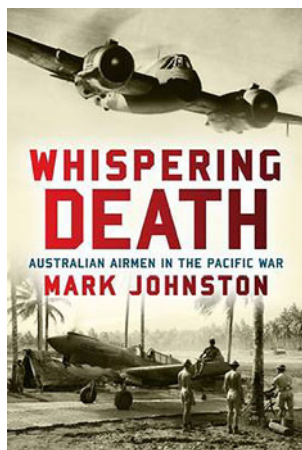
Warrick covers the aftermath of the attack, the blame-shifting and ducking for cover. Although the CIA quickly reorganised this was a huge blow to its prestige.

The book of necessity doesn’t have many written references to support it. Warrick relies on his many contacts as a reporter for the Washington Post to provide snippets of information, from which he has produced a highly detailed picture. There may be errors but at present this is the best we have. The book covers the period when al Qaeda was still a minor and relatively unknown organisation with good information and plenty of money, through the killing of its senior staff, and culminating in the death of bin Ladin.

The story, because of the simple linear way it is laid out, is very easy to follow. The amount of detail included is impressive, giving the reader an insight into the shadowy side of the Middle East war. Warrick is non-judgmental. He simply presents events as they happened. This is a nice change from some of the jingoistic flagwaver writings (from both sides) but it may not please those who want a straight black-or-white anti-Islam finish. Warrick has given us the information. Now it’s up to each of us to decide our own position instead of accepting a pre-digested opinion.

The book is a thorough post-mortem of a major failure brought about by a greed for information. It is a treatise on modern terrorist and antiterrorist techniques and should be required reading for all politicians.

**Whispering Death – Australian Airmen in the Pacific War**  
By Mark Johnston  
Allen and Unwin  
(2011)



This book won me over in the first few pages, when Johnston gave clear explanations to a number of matters I have always wondered about.

*Why was the Air Force so neglected in the between-the-wars period?*

*Why did Australia not have an aircraft factory or a training facility to turn out flight crews and ground staff in the numbers that a war would require?*

*With war brewing in the Pacific why were trained pilots being sent to Britain?*

*Why were there no Australian officers in charge of Australian squadrons in Europe?*

Johnston starts with a detailed background of the period leading up to World War II and the political problems facing the new military branch. There was the British belief that an enemy would have to invade by ship, so a powerful navy based on Singapore would best protect Australia. The Japanese development of aircraft carriers and high performance bomber aircraft was overlooked until the Pearl Harbor attack and by that time Australia was coming to realise it had big problems, starting with lack of aircraft.

This answers another question – why was Darwin undefended by aircraft when it was first bombed? Simple answer – there weren't any available. On the first attack in February 1942 there was no defensive Australian air cover at all and little anti-aircraft equipment. The Japanese were free to complete their mission. That was quickly remedied but the Wirraways, Brewster Buffalos and American P40s were simply outnumbered by Japanese fighters. The situation didn't change until secondhand Spitfires arrived from Britain and pilots who could fly them returned home. The Spitfires had their



problems in tropical conditions and early missions were notably unsuccessful. The Wirraways continued to fight in most theatres of the war.

The aircraft problem was addressed by importing a huge variety of often unsuitable aircraft. By the end of the war the RAAF had over 70 types of aircraft on inventory. Initially defence relied on the Wirraway and the rugged P40 Kittyhawk. One valuable choice was the Catalina. Johnston devotes space to this remarkable aircraft and its many missions including the vital and often dangerous job of rescuing downed aircrew. With the arrival of Lockheed's Hudson twin engined bomber the RAAF finally had an aircraft that allowed them to patrol the islands and the seas around them. Initially their work was mostly reconnaissance patrols but it developed into vital ship-attack work as the war progressed and the aircraft improved.

The men trained in combat in Europe became an asset since they could pass on their knowledge to new recruits. Others like Clive Caldwell and "Bluey" Truscott could go into combat in the Pacific and train their men "from the front". Eventually 130,000 airmen passed





through the training schools. Most of their war was fought over the oceans and islands. Navigation was critical, as were twin-engined aircraft for reliability.

Incidentally Johnston gives credit to the volunteers of the Womens Air Training Corps, a largely forgotten group. He lists many of the roles they performed and they must have been a great addition to the thousands of support people needed. There was opposition, though. Most WATC work was initially done on a volunteer basis but when a motion was put before parliament to make their positions official the leader of the Opposition is quoted as saying "the Air Force is a man's job, anyway". Their skill base was widened to include such areas as aircraft maintenance and Johnston notes that by 1945 77% of Air Force positions were open to women.

Johnston covers the lack of experienced officers in the RAAF. In Britain operations were run solely by British officers so Australia was left with a gap in planning and management experience at a squadron level and higher. This was not helped by some of the strange beliefs of the British. In early 1941 the RAF Commander-in-Chief Far East was still reassuring the increasingly disbelieving Australian Cabinet that the Japanese were not really air-minded and their aircraft were not very good. As the probability of war increased an Australian squadron was moved to Malaya. Others were spread around bases like Rabaul. In Malaya the Australian squadron leader was then replaced by an RAF

officer, causing increasing friction. The British ego suffered a huge blow with the fall of Singapore. Australia turned to the U.S. and received advanced aircraft and technical help.

Australian squadrons were gradually returning to the mainland where a new command structure was developing.

With the background set, Johnston then looks at individual experiences of the aircrews. He starts

with the Japanese invasion at Kota Bharu, from where Australian reconnaissance aircraft spotted the invasion fleet. The now well trained air and ground crews gave a good account of themselves, sinking a number of ships and barges in the fleet. The remains of the Japanese fleet were forced to withdraw. An example of the stress of the fighting:

*"Tom Livesey, his ribs heavily strapped, accidentally knocked off his own undercarriage on a sandbank on takeoff, then found himself taking on six Oscars (a Nakajima fighter, in some ways superior to the Zero). Shrapnel struck his calves and an ankle, while bullets ripped into his engine and cockpit. "Friendly" Bofors guns tried to shoot him down, too, but he survived this and a belly landing". It was probably not the best day of his life.*

As the Japanese attacked the Malay airfields there are tales of desperate fighting and heroic action by the small number of fighter aircraft left. Gradually the squadrons withdrew to Singapore where they suffered further at the hands of the superior Japanese aircraft numbers as well as artillery bombardment, as the airfields were in range of field guns on the mainland. Finally the squadrons were all withdrawn to the Dutch East Indies, leaving Singapore open to air attack but preventing a fruitless war of attrition.

Johnston also chronicles some examples of inexperienced Australian ground crews under fire.

These are not flattering but they are still a part of the unsanitised history of the war in Malaya. The deficiencies of the old Buffaloes and Wirraways were obvious in air to air combat but the Wirraway was still valuable in a low level attack role. This rugged little aircraft is worth a book by itself.

As control of the RAAF was wrested from the British changes were being made. Aircraft were stretched to provide some sort of cover to the many airfields and military bases. In spite of this, offensive missions were undertaken. Regular combat was being fought over the Bismarck Sea and the major shipping routes that were used to reinforce the Japanese. Enemy airfields were attacked. Decent aircraft were now being built that could carry the war effectively to the enemy. Even the Lockheed Hudson, a converted airliner, was turned into an attack bomber to replace the slow, clumsy Avro Ansons.

After U.S. carriers moved into the area and Macarthur began his "island-hopping" campaign the USAAF came to dominate the eastern Pacific theatre. The RAAF was incorporated into the Allied war effort under Macarthur but Australian squadrons continued to run long distance ocean patrols, attack shipping at masthead heights and supporting landings along the Papuan coast and among the islands. The Japanese had to be supplied by sea and every freighter, barge and troopship was at risk of an Australian air attack. To avoid air attack they had to move further out into the Pacific, but this gave the American submarines a turn at them. The reminiscences of the pilots and aircrew tell the history of this period far better than the official reports and Johnston again lets their words carry the feel of combat. The stories are often told in a laconic style that belies the deadly nature of the combat.

Amazingly the lessons of Darwin had not sunk in. The major forward base of Port Moresby was undefended by fighter planes yet if taken by the



Japanese it would be a base from which their bombers could attack ports in Queensland. For some time it suffered regular bombing raids until finally a squadron of Kittyhawks was sent there. Even so, the squadron was inadequate and underequipped for some time. The mechanics and riggers had few tools and no buildings to work in. At least the squadron proved a morale booster for the locals. Johnston gives an almost day by day description of the actions based on Port Moresby.

The reports cover a tremendous range of attacks, defence sorties, crashes and lost pilots. Australian bases were under regular attack from advanced Japanese airfields and many aircraft were lost on both sides. The reports show the Australians becoming more confident in their combat techniques but more Spitfires were lost in collisions and accidents than to enemy attack. The superb coordination from the ground developed during the Battle of Britain was noticeably missing.

At a higher level there were problems with conflicts within the leadership, a high command that was hopeless at administering and supplying its Air Force, and cliques that developed among some pilots. There seems to have been a remnant of the ludicrous British class structure infecting some officers at this time. An en-





tire squadron was accused of being cowardly “dingoes” because they allegedly would not close with the enemy in a dogfight. Saburo Sakai, the leading Japanese fighter pilot, praised the bravery and willingness of the Australian pilots to close with the Japanese. General MacArthur felt that Australians were cowards but that opinion gradually changed as major low level attacks became more effective against Japanese shipping and land bases. One pilot returned from a low level raid on Penfui airstrip with a length of the radio mast embedded in his wing. Many others didn’t return, having been shot down, caught and executed.

The Bristol Beaufighter gave the RAAF a new weapon to which Johnston rightly devotes space. The powerful, quiet Beaufighter with its long range and weaponry load of machine guns, cannon, bombs and rockets became the bane of the enemy. Its quiet approach on an attack run led to its being christened “Whispering Death” by some. Again the pilots’ reminiscences are a valuable in understanding the methods and strategies of attack.

The RAAF was always regarded as a subservient air force, first by the British and then by the Americans. MacArthur wanted to split the U.S. Air Force from the joint command and to relabel the RAAF as Coastal Defence Command. This idea was fought by the government, but it set the tone for MacArthur’s attitude to the RAAF. Henceforth all the more public events would be done by Americans. Fortunately his new officer in charge of the air forces, General Kenny, was a better leader. His inspection tours of RAAF bases earned him the respect of the airmen. After the Milne Bay landings Australian – American respect increased no matter what their Su-

preme Commander thought, as a result of the RAAF’s effective support of the ground troops. Australian and American planes controlled the seas around Papua and New Guinea preventing resupply of the garrisons and harassing the airfields.

This sometimes involved shooting at Japanese soldiers in the water, a practice that airmen carried out with mixed emotions. Although MacArthur and Halsey took the main targets the RAAF, RNZAF and the remains of the Dutch East Indies Air Force tidied up the bypassed targets. Johnston makes the point that this was as much because the Allied aircraft were now secondrate designs and there were too few of them for major actions. They were also better at small low level attacks, whereas the U.S. bombers were becoming specialised in high level area bombing. The Australian pilots, however, felt left behind by the Yanks and brassed off at being given heavily defended targets like airfields that were now of little strategic value. Many pilots and aircrew didn’t survive this part of the war. Morale was low, supplies and transport hard to obtain. Such airpower as the Japanese still had was mostly directed against the beachheads in the Philippines. Johnston gives a good analysis of this period and the feelings of the pilots.

His concluding chapter pretty well sums up the RAAF’s Pacific War. He offers credible reasons for the actions and problems, as well as discussing the politics and power struggles. He fills in many gaps in the popular conception of the war and covers the good and the bad in an impartial way.

The book also includes appendices on aircraft type identification, casualty and victory totals, kills listed by pilot and kill claims, and a comprehensive glossary. The final appendix is a thorough list of the references used, as is appropriate in a work like this. It is to Johnston’s credit that he has not written the book as an academic tome but has made it readable by leaving this information until the end.

Mark Johnston PhD is currently Head of History at Scotch College in Melbourne. Australian military history is his passion, resulting in eight books. This one is a worthy addition to Australia’s war histories.

**Battle of Los Angeles**  
**The Asylum**  
**Peacock Films**  
**R4 DVD**

The Asylum has a record of budget remakes of big name films, but this one really hits the bottom. Yet it has a dreadful fascination. Forget that it's supposed to be sci-fi and look at it as a schlock action thriller with a SF background, and surprisingly it works well.

The plot, such as it is: In 1942 a U.S. pilot and his Corsair aircraft were kidnapped by aliens. In return the U.S. captured one of the aliens. Think Roswell and all that stuff. Now the aliens are back for their buddy and they are not happy. Their huge spaceship hangs over LA, just like the one in the great South African film District 9. The Air Force, being the Air Force, promptly tries to shoot it down.

Lots of fighting. It destroys anything sent against it then releases small fighting ships that destroy every piece of technology they come up against. Anything transistorised is destroyed, but ham



radios are unaffected since "they use vacuum tubes." Huh? How long ago? The only vehicles that still run are also rewired for vacuum tubes. Huh again???

The out-of-date pilot returns to his old airfield and the remaining soldiers are told to take him to "Sector 7" for debriefing. Think Roswell again, but for some reason buried under ruined buildings. The captured alien is also kept here. They hope the returned pilot may be able to tell them how to destroy the aliens but he has a surprise for them. The little group of survivors is helped to get there by a sword-wielding female ninja Army captain. Her sword can penetrate the armour of the little fighters, although bullets can't. I'm running out of "Huh?".

Lots of fighting follows. I particularly liked the alien machine that can catch a grenade and lob it right back. The leechlike aliens are killed (lots of fighting) and their ship crashes into San Francisco, therefore carrying out some much-needed civic improvement. It all ends happily ever after, naturally.

The plot is ludicrous and incoherent, the acting is dreadful, the CGI is dodgy. It is huge fun, as is picking the plot elements pinched from other films. That's about all you will have to use your brain for. If you enjoyed the Sci-Fi flicks of the sixties and seventies, you will love this one. Switch your disbelief off, sit back, and enjoy the action.







**Dog Pound**  
**Prison Drama**  
**Hopscotch Films**  
**R4**

The Dog Pound is a detention institution for young offenders who are not quite adult yet. Enola Vale prison is run by a warden who just wants a quiet life with no trouble, but trouble is brewing anyway. Three older longterm inmates comprise their own little gang, preying on the newer weaker arrivals. So far nobody has been seriously hurt so the prison staff think everything is under control.

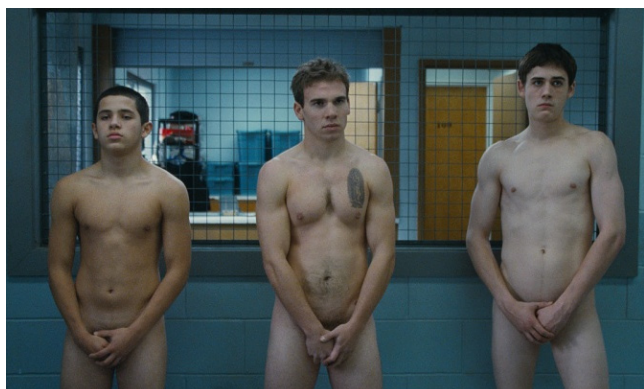
Three new inmates, Butch, Davis and Angel are transferred in. Butch is on his last chance, after assaulting his parole officer. Next time he is charged he will go to an adult prison. It is hard for him to control his temper as the gang singles him out. Davis is a drug dealer and womaniser. Angel is a car thief. The three realise they must protect each other but one by one they are assaulted or raped or robbed. Slowly but steadily the troubles increase. Finally Butch loses his temper when being bullied. He doesn't snitch on



the gang but takes his revenge when he is let out of solitary.

These growing troubles affect the warders as well. One warder, Goodyear, a decent sort of guy, is told by the warden that he will have to work and forgo his son's birthday party. The birthday party is to be a major event for Goodyear's family and in an unusual fit of temper he hurls Angel against a wall and accidentally kills him. He was a decent warder but without his influence the lackadaisical warders and restless inmates start to lose control. The prison erupts.

The story is not particularly original but it is played with a non-stop intensity. It can only stand on the credibility of its actors. The young actors show a higher level of experience and professionalism than I would have expected. We are left hanging at the end. Do the remaining boys suffer? What happens to the warden and the warder who committed the accidental killing? These are left to our imagination and there will be no happy ending.



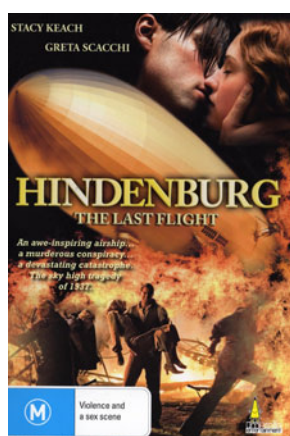


**Hindenburg: The Last Flight**  
**Historical drama**  
**Germany**  
**Umbrella Entertainment**  
**R4 DVD**

*English Language*

The story of the Hindenburg and its disastrous destruction through being filled with hydrogen is well known. There have been many films and documentaries about it, some promoting conspiracy theories. The basic fact is that it was filled with hydrogen because the Americans would not sell the Germans the non-flammable helium they were now producing. When mooring at Lakehurst in New Jersey a spark, probably from built-up static electricity, ignited the hydrogen and the whole Zeppelin was engulfed in flame and destroyed with great loss of life.

This new film adds a couple more conspiracies to the story, none of which detract from the facts – they are there purely to increase the drama.



We have a bomb plot designed to shame the Americans into selling helium, and a batch of stolen secret German invasion plans for the start of World War II. There is a love interest story between Merten Kroger, an engineer and Jennifer van Zandt, daughter of the wealthy industrialist who will profit if he can sell helium to Germany. There is an underlying plot for which the helium is just a front.

The story plays well as a drama without too many liberties being taken with the facts. The CGI is simply stunning. The shots of the Zeppelin on the ground and coming out of its huge hangar are near perfect and the scenes of the fire convey the scale of the disaster and its effects on the onlookers. The American overdub of the voices, something I usually hate, is done well. About the only weakness in the film is the shaky handheld camera shots for the close-ups.

The film is a good drama set against a good historical recreation.



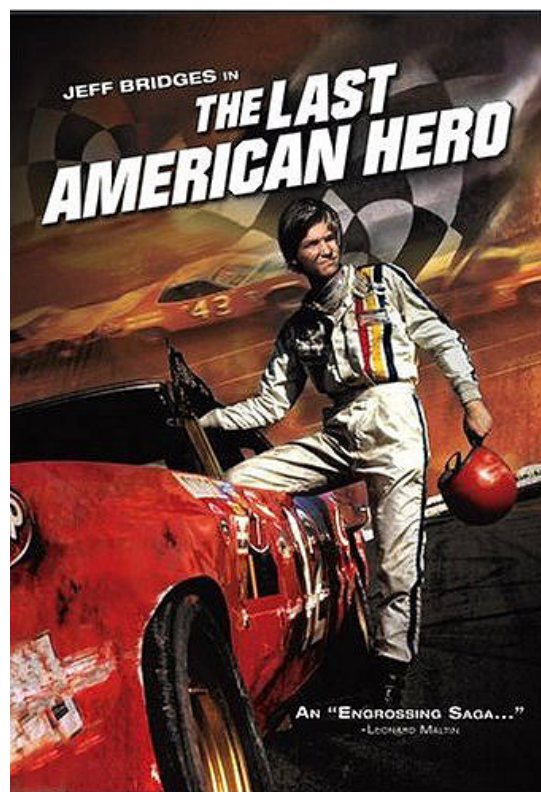
**The Last American Hero**  
**Classic Thriller**  
**Second Sight**  
**R2 DVD**

The film is a reissue of the classic 1973 car racing film telling the true story of Junior Jackson. Young Jackson started out a moonshine runner delivering moonshine whisky from his father's still to customers around the backwoods area. The moonshine makers had a rather relaxed attitude to paying revenue on their product so the full force of the law was set in motion against them. With the local lawmen and the revenue men after him Junior had many close escapades in his hotted up car. Moonshine running developed his driving skills for what was to come.

When his father was finally caught and the still blown up, Junior had to make money to keep the family going and to pay his father's legal costs.

He hit on speedway racing. Now the careful building and setting up of his car was worthwhile. He started to win races, supported by a group of friends as his pit crew. It was a shoe-string operation and the inevitable happened – the car crashed and was not repairable. Junior had to swallow his pride and ask to race for a local promoter.

As a member of the racing group Junior had to learn new tactics and team cooperation. This came hard to a previously independent young driver but he succeeded. He moved into the lucrative NASCAR series.



Junior was played surprisingly well by a young Jeff Bridges whose natural backwoods good looks really fit the part. A young and rather plump Valerie Perrine makes a short appearance as Junior's temporary groupie girlfriend and Gary Busey makes an early appearance as Junior's brother. Regardless of who acts in the film, it's the cars that star. There's something about an American V8 thundering its head off and the film looks and sounds superb – a real window-rattler.

The film has cleaned up well for its age. Even if you're not a racing car fan it is still a good piece of drama.

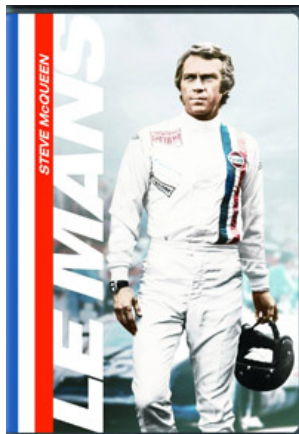


**Le Mans**  
**Action thriller**  
**Umbrella**  
**Entertainment**  
**R4 DVD**

There are many reissues of older films coming out and, frankly, a lot of them should have been left buried in the archives. *Le Mans* is an exception. When it came out in 1970 it was probably the ultimate car racing film and this reissue maintains its position. The digital remastering is superb and the film could have been made yesterday, although the much younger Steve McQueen is a giveaway to its real age.

The reprocessed sound is excellent, colours are accurate and not washed out, and the package includes extras that are both entertaining and informative. There was no CGI in those days so it is all real footage and effects. We see in the extras how the cars were loaded with cameras, ensuring a range of dramatic angles for the editors. Technically the film was quite adventurous for its time.

There is only the barest of plot. Michael Delaney lost a friend in a crash in the previous year's race. Delaney himself was badly injured. Does



he still have what it takes to win at Le Mans? He is tentatively developing a relationship with his friend's widow. Now, in his Gulf Porsche, he intends to win the race.

Now, on with the cars. The Porsche versus Ferrari battle is played out on the track at high speeds, thankfully without too many cheap thrills crashes. The traditional technique of filming the shot then speeding it up just wouldn't work with these cars so it was shot at full speed. We are treated to spins, crashes, explosions and fast manoeuvring, all at realistic speeds. The battles in the pits come in full detail – a slow pit crew can cost a race, but these guys are experts and they get their due credit.

It is good to see this classic film reissued, especially in the high quality DVD and BluRay formats that usually show every weakness in old films. There are no major weaknesses in the reissue and it is well worth watching again.





## Limitless Cinema Release

Limitless is an intriguing science fiction story focused on the nature of smart drugs that increase IQ. Traditionally films on any sort of drugs tend to fall in two camps; films that glamorize all manner of drug use or films that show the supposed human cost of a given substance.

*Limitless* is different, it is complex and intelligent and explores both the use and misuse of a smart drug called NZT which gives the user access to 100% of their brain capacity rather than the 20% we currently use. The film is directed by Neil Burger who gave us the *Illusionist* and it certainly has a unique look and feel. The way in which the “look” of the world changes ever time Eddie takes NZT is especially impressive with its use of strong focus and an intense colour presentation.

The story focuses on Eddie Morra (Bradley Cooper) who dreams of producing a great work of literature. The problem is he can never get a word on the page. One day a life changing coincidence occurs when he meets his ex-brother in law Vernon. Eddie knows Vernon is a drug dealer and due to previous substance problems has no wish to remake his acquaintance, but over a



coffee Vernon mentions this new smart drug and Eddie reluctantly takes a sample. It changes his life, soon his novel is written and he is on the path to fame. Of course this has some drawbacks especially when Vernon is brutally murdered by someone looking for the drug and Eddie steals his stash and has the only known supply. Soon he is working for mogul Carl Van Loon (Robert De Niro) manipulating markets and making huge profits but things are not as simple as they seem. Another mogul has also been using NZT and a criminal who stole a tab from Eddie is hot on his tail to get some more.

Eddie also finds the drug has some side effects, he starts missing time and is accused of a murder which he honestly does not know whether he committed. There are forces that seem to be working against and conspiracies abound as a superbly complex tale unfolds.

As he gains control of the dosage he is able to use it effectively but is at the hands of the new owner of the drug company, none other than Carl Van Loon.



However there does seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel but that would be telling you the ending wouldn't it?

This is smart science fiction with lots of interesting themes, superior cinematography and excellent performances all round. Robert De Niro has played some disastrous roles but in *Limitless* he is absolutely superb as is, surprisingly, Bradley Cooper. This is a well-rounded work of cinema which is certainly worth seeing.

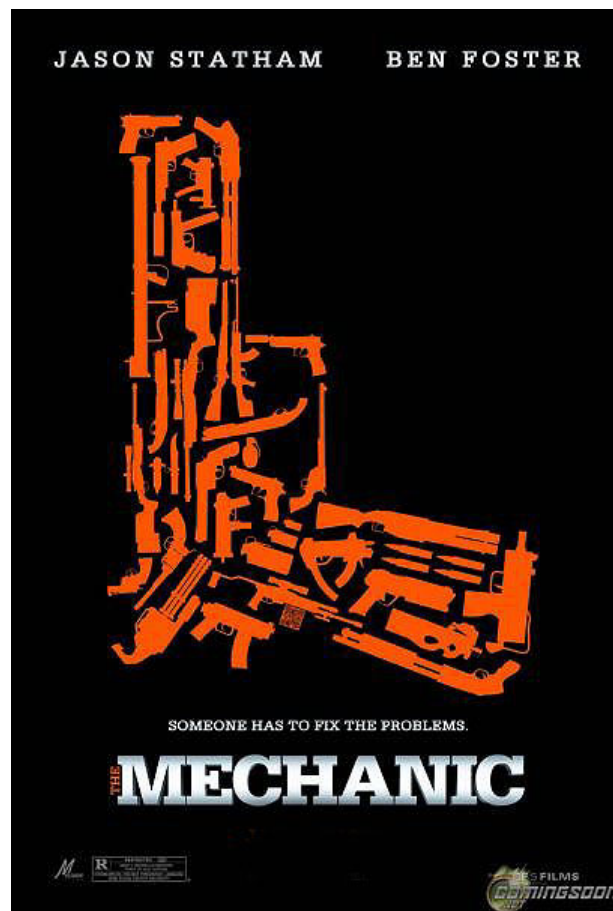
**The Mechanic**  
Roadshow  
Entertainment  
R4 DVD

I must admit to being a Charles Bronson fan and I thought his 1972 film *The Mechanic* was one of his best. This remake has big shoes to fill. Can Jason Statham create the same impression? Is the remake strong enough to stand on its own? The answer to both is YES.



For those who haven't seen the original it is a story about a professional hitman who executes a friend – he works for a “company” and doesn't have the luxury of declining a job. Donald Sutherland, another actor I respect, briefly plays his friend Harry McKenna. McKenna is quietly taking money from the company. When Mr Bishop (Jason Statham) executes him on behalf of the company he is approached by Harry's son, Steve, an otherwise idle layabout in whom Bishop sees potential. He has guessed that Mr Bishop is an assassin. We are unsure whether Steve knows Mr Bishop killed his father. Bishop starts training him in the art of assassination – physical fitness, a knowledge of drugs and weapons, meticulous preparation and a good plan. The next two kills are a bit messy and we see that Steve can be impulsive, but both are successful. Bishop is warned by the company's spokesman that he should have got their permission before taking on an apprentice.

They do not like anything they haven't approved of. The rest of the story is of betrayal and fighting for survival and revenge. It is a slight reinterpretation of the original story and carries



a little more mystery.

Charles Bronson developed the personality of Mr Bishop as a quiet, methodical man. Although Statham develops Bishop's personality in a slightly similar way it is a little more action-oriented than Bronson's. Remakes these days tend to be more action-oriented and this one is no exception. There are the usual car chases, explosions, gory gunfights and leaping from high buildings. Surprisingly they are not overdone and serve the revised plot rather than just being gratuitous violence. Much of Bronson's meticulous preparation for an operation is glossed over. Ben Foster plays Steve and his personality is hard to fathom. Although he is capable of acts of violence he seems preoccupied – does he know Bishop killed his father? If so, what does he plan to do about it?

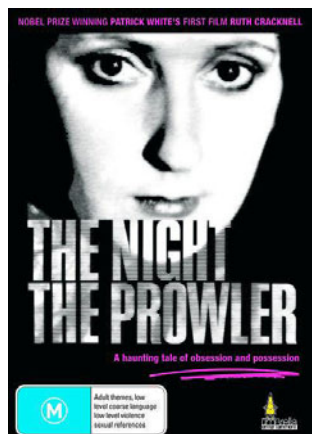
I usually dislike glossed-up remakes but this one succeeds. Bronson fans may prefer the original but this is an excellent remake and well worth seeing anyway.



**The Night The Prowler**  
**Umbrella**  
**Entertainment**  
**All Regions**

Nowadays we tend to regard class-conscious people as anachronisms or even objects of ridicule, but in post-World War II society attitudes were different. Regardless of their war service people were expected to know their place and social climbing was a popular occupation among the wannabees. Doris Bannister is one such. She has a nice house, a circle of appropriate friends, a husband of course, and a daughter Felicity. Felicity is very much Doris' trophy daughter. She is brought up in the image Doris has planned for her. She doesn't have many friends and is becoming withdrawn, but any personality she might develop is swamped by Doris' gentle but firm dominance of her life. Her father is no help – he also is dominated by Doris.

One night the parents are awoken by Felicity's screams. Felicity claims a man has entered her room and raped her, but there is something a little unconvincing in her story. She refuses to be examined by the family doctor. Doris is horrified. You get the impression that she is more concerned that her carefully arranged life has been disrupted than any feeling of sympathy for her daughter. For Felicity, however, it is the start of a new feeling – a rebellion against her mother for her own independence.



Felicity's personality changes. She starts to visit clubs for young people and make some friends of her own, she (gasp) rides pillion on a motorbike, and she finally starts to experience life after the stultifying repression at home.

Doris catches her sneaking out one night wearing her motorbike leathers and is horrified. Can this really be her daughter? What will the neighbours think? In a burst of self-assertion Felicity tells her "I'm not the record you like to play". Having finally broken her mother's overbearing control Felicity goes further. She becomes a night prowler herself.

One day she is walking through a derelict house and comes across an old man who is dying on a filthy mattress. Felicity stays with him, recognising in him a similar lonely soul like her. Will it change her outlook? Can she survive without her mother's firm guidance? Can she maintain her independence?

The film was not widely accepted on its release, except by the critics. This is a pity as it features a wonderful performance by the brilliant Ruth Cracknell who went on to a long and distinguished career in Australian film. There are unmistakable echoes of Doris in the character of Thelma in the TV series *Kingswood Country*.

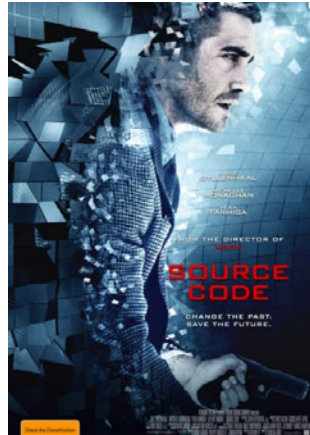
Kerry Walker as Felicity doesn't get much chance to shine until later in the film. Then she plays the rebellious Felicity with just the right amount of confusion and growing excitement at her independence.

The only extras are commentary by the director, Jim Sharman, and Kerry Walker, plus of course the inevitable and pointless trailer.



**Source Code**  
**Hopscotch**  
**R4 DVD**

From the highly acclaimed director of Moon (Duncan Jones) comes a new science fiction thriller, Source Code. An unusual film filled with challenging ideas and thought provoking concepts you will discuss it for some time later.



Colter Stevens, played by Jake Gyllenhaal is a highly decorated a US army helicopter pilot who crashed on a mission in Afghanistan. When he awakens, he finds himself in civilian clothes aboard a crowded commuter train arriving slightly late into Chicago. He is sitting across a rather attractive young woman Christina (Michelle Monaghan) who talks to him as though she has known him all her life. After some time he realizes he is in somebody else's body that of a history teacher.

After eight minutes a bomb explodes and throws Colter back into what appears to be a damaged aircraft. There is a video monitor in front of him and he is advised that he is on a special mission.

Again he is thrown back into the situation on the train, this time he is slightly more aware of the nature of the situation but still confused by landing in another man's body and by Christina's attention. As he returns time and time again he finds he must find a bomb and locate the bomb-



er since this is only the first of a number of attacks, the next of which it is believed will be a dirty bomb which could kill millions of people.

As the film progressed Colter challenges his commanding officer and is told that he is working with the "Source Code" a limited period after death in which an operative can step into someone's remaining consciousness and use it to gain information. At the same time this, of course, triggers more questions than answers and Colter must face his own condition and the nature of reality.

With explorations of life after death, quantum physics and the eternal moral question of the "one versus the many" this is a superb work of science fiction. Using a limited range of special effects yet superb character acting and great twists and turns this will keep you in suspense to the very end.





# **Thirteen Icon R4**

In common with the current U.S. practice of remaking older films, including foreign ones, this film is a remake of a French film from 2005 called 13 Tzameti. We reviewed this in 2008 in Synergy. It was a budget film that relied on a simple plot and good acting but it had one big drawback – it was in French, subtitled. It seems U.S. audiences are simply too lazy to read subtitles so a remake seemed like a good idea. It would also be a chance to tighten up the French film which was a little slow getting started. I was encouraged when I found Gela Babluani, the writer of the French film, was to write the script for this film as well. Too often a film loses out badly when a new director puts his own spin on a remake.

The story gets moving faster than the original. It involves a young man, Jack, who is desperate for money to pay for his dad's medical bills. He takes over a dead man's role in an unknown "game" and finds he is now one of the participants in a high-stakes Russian Roulette tournament. The participants stand in a circle pointing a gun with one bullet at the man in front, then fire on a signal. Survivors go on to the next round and get two bullets. And so on. The final test is a face-to-face confrontation from which only one man can walk away. He is reticent to take part but is left no choice. His sponsor needs a gunman and if he tries to back out he will be shot. No gunman, no betting, and the bets run into millions of dollars.



The film retains the tension of the matches but loses much of the character development of the gunmen. In the original some gunmen almost become friends, but know that in the next round they may have to kill their new friend. This is largely disregarded in the remake. The greed of the gamblers is well brought out and their completely amoral nature is covered much as in the original. The final part of the story reflects the French film accurately, but I won't give away the ending.

Now the bad bits. Although the publicity promotes Jason Statham strongly he only gets about five minutes of the film. He is really only window dressing to make the film look bigger





than it is. Alexander Skarsgard, a rising pretty boy Swedish actor, manages to go through the whole film looking like he is on Valium and the verge of tears. No matter how good the actor, this remake just doesn't give them much to work with.

Although Gela Babluani had a lot to do with the script he does not seem to have had enough influence on the production. The chance to refine his original film has been rather wasted in an attempt to give the film more mass appeal. That's not to say it is a bad film. It is really quite

good, and the tension before each game is faithfully built up. It hasn't been too Americanised (how do you get Family Values and God into such a film?).

I am of two minds about whether it is a better film than Babluani's original. I guess if you don't like subtitles, get the remake. It's a little softer than the French version but a little tighter in the editing. Well worth watching.

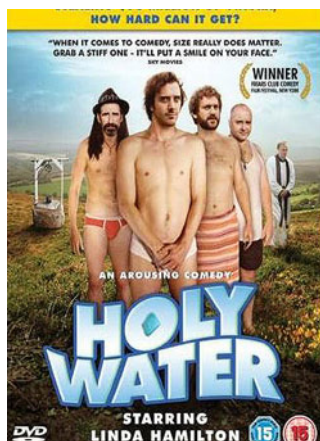




# Holy Water Reel DVD Pty Ltd R4 DVD

I remember fondly a simple Irish comedy called Waking Ned Devine, where a man in a small village has died from shock when he learns he has won the Irish National Lottery. The village must pretend he is still alive as they all need a share of the money. Now we have Holy Water, beginning in a similar little declining village. One of a group of four friends has decided if he is to get anywhere in life he will have to leave the village. There are no job openings in the village and he cannot marry the girl of his dreams without a job. His friends are aghast but can see the problem. Then the Postman finds he will shortly be losing his job and the publican finds he is nearly broke. Suddenly crime looks attractive. They decide they will steal a truck full of Viagra being shipped to the Pfizer drug company's warehouse nearby. They will then take the drugs to Amsterdam and make their fortunes.

The postman, Podger, devises a plan. Here is the first problem. His knowledge of crime comes from watching James Bond films. Still, with a good plan what could go wrong? The robbery goes ahead with two of the perpetrators disguised as nuns and armed with a wooden gun and they find they now have about eighteen



tons of Viagra. Before the truck is broken into its crew manage to activate their tracking device. The four would-be criminals find it and throw it in the river attached to a plastic bag. It will float out to sea.

Then things go wrong. The drug company is irate – the drugs were worth 63 million pounds, not the few thousand that the criminals believed. A two million dollar reward is offered and an American security team arrives to take over the investigation. Because the tracker is heading down the river to the sea they think the drugs may have been hijacked by the Russia mafia. The criminals however are now in danger of being turned in by the townspeople for the reward. Everybody seems now to know who did the heist thanks to the talkative priest. They must dispose of the drugs before they are caught with them.

The drugs are dumped in a small roadside well that is a supposed source of Holy Water since it is blessed by a statue of the Virgin Mary. The spring that feeds the well also feeds the village water supply and Viagra leaks into the town water. Suddenly the whole town turns randy. True Holy Water indeed !

The Americans are sure something odd is going on in the village. So are the local police. The criminals are still desperately worried that they may be turned in. The village is getting a bit of a reputation for "miracle cures" for certain dysfunctions. .

Holy Water is a happy little comedy, not particularly deep but more subtle than most. It is all done in good taste. It is simply loads of fun in a style that we don't see enough of.

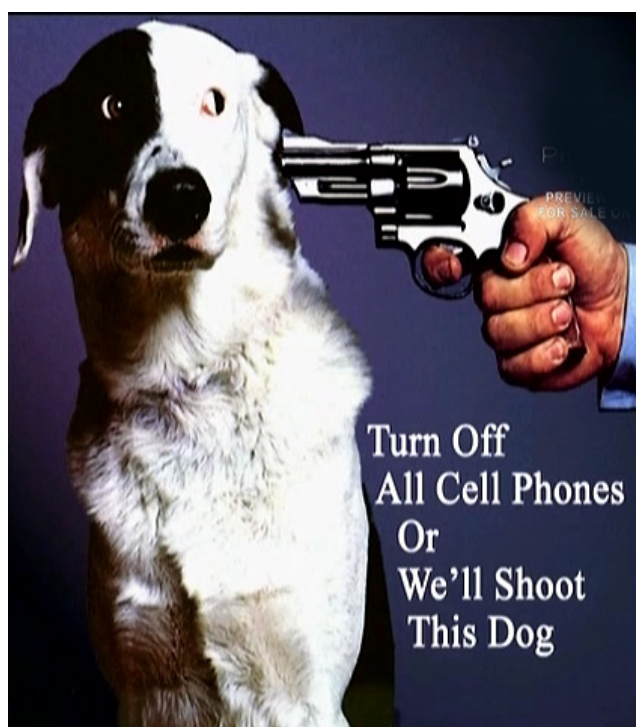
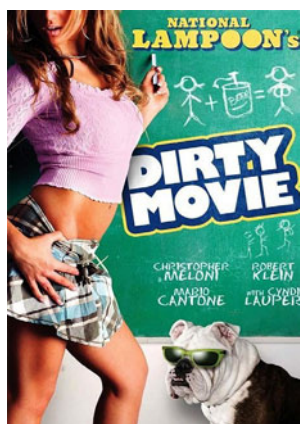


**National Lampoon's  
Dirty Movie  
Comedy  
The Asylum  
Pinnacle Films  
R4 DVD**

The film is from the National Lampoon crew, which should give you a good idea of what you're going to get. Essentially it is a string of every offensive joke ever invented plus a good helping of breasts. Crass, disgusting, racist and stereotype jokes abound although the back story has an ongoing argument about whether dead baby jokes are appropriate. The jokes range from old to positively prehistoric, but even though I have heard them all before it's good to see them trotted out again for another run.

Little of the humour is subtle. Currently the realm of offensive jokes is almost entirely confined to stage comedians – we seem to be afraid of these jokes in case they offend a minority group. The filmmakers are not the least bit concerned, though. They set out to offend everyone. I must give them credit, though, for leaving out the nastier racist, gay, fat people and women jokes. Offensive, yes. Vicious, no.

We start with the question of what to do if a Non-Threatening Black Man moves in next door. From here the jokes go downhill, but they just keep coming – redneck jokes, gay jokes, party-sniffing pedophile priest jokes, barman jokes, doctor jokes, Jew jokes and even Little Johnny

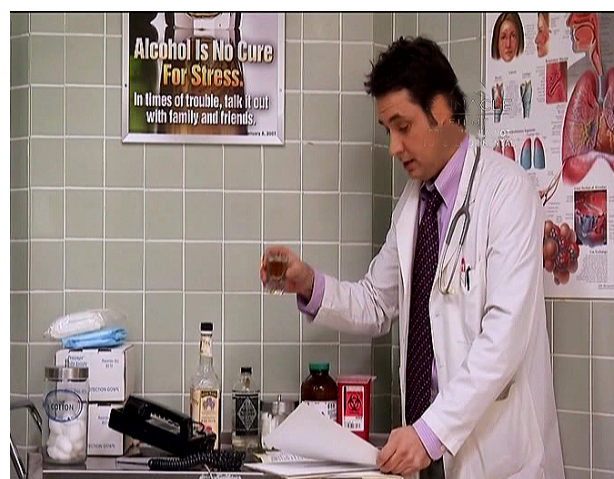


jokes. There are also midgets and nuns (that should get our Editor's attention).

The back story, while not really important in the film, contains a surprisingly insightful discussion on why some people find some racist jokes offensive. Even so this is not a film for people who are at all polite or sensitive.

We have the compulsory handful of celebrities such as Cyndi Lauper. She should have stuck to singing, but I guess her acting abilities are not going to shine in a film like this.

Like so many National Lampoon films it is best watched with a few beers and some mates. It's great !





**Once A Gangster**  
China  
Pinnacle Films  
R4 DVD

*Mandarin, English subtitles.*

We have seen a lot of gangster / Triad films coming out of Hong Kong, often dealing with the struggle for power within and between the gangs. *Once A Gangster* has the traditional elements, many pinched from other films, but takes a completely different viewpoint of the power of the gangs.

We start with Roast Pork, an inoffensive young lad who wants to join a gang. His parents run a little restaurant and he has seen them financially crippled by the extortion money taken by a local gang. He decides to join the gang as a soldier but is pretty inept. He does have one big advantage, He can cook really well, and the gang's soon-to-be Don, Kerosene, soon notices his abilities and gives Roast Pork his unusual gang name. The two men become friends as they rise in the gang hierarchy.

Some years Kerosene has not forgotten his friend and Roast Pork is now running his own high class restaurant and supporting an expensive wife and two kids. Life is not going so well for Kerosene. He has been embezzling money from the Triad and can't afford to pay it back. He has only one alternative – he must resign his position as Don and hand over to someone who has money and will pay off the debts and run the gang. He chooses his old friend Roast Pork.

There is no longer much prestige in the position of Don. The takings are falling as people refuse to pay extortion, the police are cracking down



and the new Don will automatically be arrested so they can show their power. Being Don no longer carries the respect it once did. The successful gangs have all gone into legitimate businesses. How does Roast Pork resist Kerosene's pressure?

Roast Pork's election to the position of Don is not what he wants. He would rather be left in peace to run his restaurant. He has opposition too. Sparrow, a fellow gangster, is just out of prison and his drug soaked mother is urging him to take over as Don. She is old-school and still sees prestige in having a son who is a Don. While in prison Sparrow has got religion and has begun studying economics. He wants to go on to University but his mother still thinks there is prestige in being Don so she pressures him to fight for the position. How do these two men





*not* become Don?

To further complicate matters there is a third gangster who feels he should be Don. Nobody takes his claim seriously. He can't tell his right hand from his left and his brother is a police informant. He is, however, an old-style gangster who will get his way by killing the opposition and he has the men to do it.

Some years ago a very good film came out of Hong Kong called *Internal Affairs*. It dealt with a young man planted by the Triads in the police force and his rise to power. Co-writer and director Felix Chong wrote the story and now he has completely satirised himself in *Once A Gangster*. The humour of the situation is subtly understated and there is still the violence expected in a gangster film, but the humour carries over to the casting as well. Jordan Chan and Ekin Chang were actors in a popular gang-based TV series *Young and Dangerous*. Now they are effectively parodying themselves. The story varies



between deadly serious and absurdly comic, but it is always fast moving. There are a couple of superb parts given to the minor players, such as On-On Yu playing the part of Sparrow's mother. She does the raddled old junkie with tremendous energy, berating her son for his lack of ambition while smoking, inhaling and swallowing her massive daily drug quota.

I can't help wondering if the Mandarin soundtrack would be better than the English translation, but the subtitlers are to be complimented for their work in getting the subtlety of the humour into English. Even so there are strange moments in the film that subtitles just can't handle. Why do the gang set out to burn a bank then break out into song (complete with orchestral backing) when captured by the police? The film is not a laugh-a-minute comedy, but it takes a well-directed fresh look at the gangs in a black comedy that will give you 95 minutes of really good viewing.





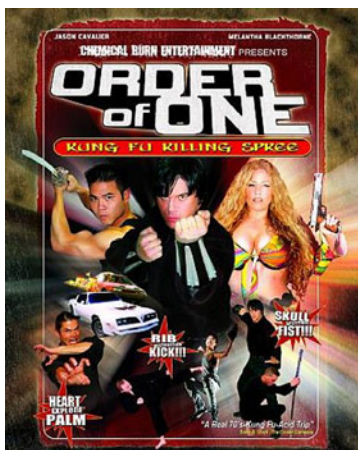
**Order of One  
Comedy Kung Fu  
Chemical Burn  
Entertainment  
R1 DVD**

The latest entry in throwback filmmaking, Order of One spoofs those dreadful 70s kung fu action films, with a passing swipe at the Carnaby Street look. This type of film was popular in the drive-in era, and it's good to see it revived. Sort of. We very soon realise that this is not intended to be a serious film. If you haven't realised this already, the first fight scene includes those action speech balloons in the Batman style. Instead of "oof" or "splat" we get helpful balloons like "break neck fist" or "drunken pool cue swipe".

The plot is basic. An escaped prisoner and a newspaper reporter must return the Sword of Destiny, reputed to be made from the spearhead that pierced the side of Jesus, to an unspecified "order". What exactly they have to do with it we don't know. The sword has magic powers but we don't get to see them in the film.

It is being sought by Mr Park, the local Chinese gang leader. As well as his gang he has recruited a group of pneumatic youngish women dressed in the worst of sixties clothing, a group of ex-prison tough guys, and so on. That's enough plot, now let's get on with the action.

We now get extended kung fu battles, fistfights



galore, gunfights, and so on. There is plenty of blood for you gorefreaks out there. The kung fu kill scenes are captioned with those wonderful cheesy balloons previously mentioned. The action is completely over the top and everyone seems to have a good time hamming it up. For a low budget film it's a great spoof. It does for action films what Christopher Mihm does for science fiction.

The Extras for a change are worth watching. As a documentary on low budget filmmaking it is excellent, and we also see how some of the stunts were done. There are a couple of deleted scenes that are "must see", as well as the bloopers.

Overall it's just a good cheap action thriller spoof. I loved every minute of it, cheesy speech balloons and all.



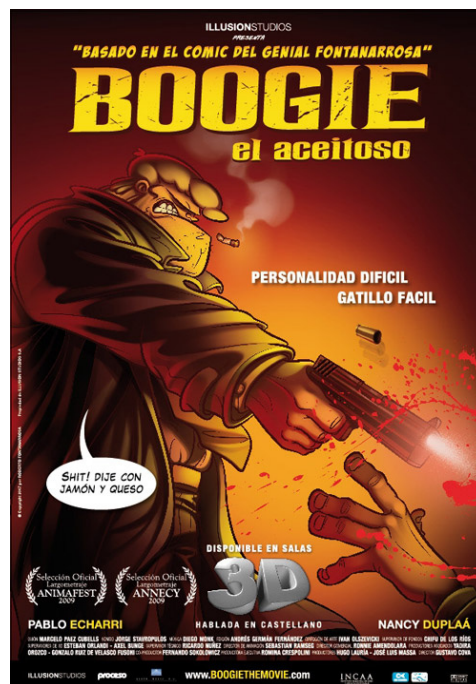
**Boogie (The Oily One)**  
**Animation, crime**  
**Icon Home Entertainment**  
**R4**

**Available on DVD, Blu-Ray 3D.**

*English overdub*  
*Argentina*

When you talk about animated films, Argentina is not a country that comes to mind. Yet this film is better than any U.S. production in terms of its violence, political incorrectness and general wrongness. You will love it.

Boogie, the titular anti-hero, is a thug for hire. During the film he slaughters his way through large numbers of people to reach his goal. He is quite impartial – innocent bystanders, women, policemen, antismoking protesters, news reporters and criminals all fall before him. He is completely amoral. He has a low opinion of women, regarding them simply as sex objects to be used (or denigrated if they don't meet his standards): *"Every woman wants a man - to give her orders, to set limits"*. He admits he is a little prejudiced: *"I belong to the largest racist community. The one that hates the poor"*.



Boogie is given a contract by criminal gang leader Calabria to track down and kill a girl who will testify against him in a court case. Calabria's henchman thinks Boogie is getting a bit old and slow, so he also commissions a new killer, Blackburn, to take out both the witness and Boogie. The new killer will take a lower price than Boogie, so the evil henchman can pocket the difference.

From here it is a race to get the witness to the court, alive or dead, while being hunted by Blackburn. Boogie may be softening up a bit – he has fallen in love with her – well, at least he hasn't killed her yet.

This is definitely not a cartoon show for the kiddies. To a mature adult, though, it is a lot of fun.





**Megapython vs  
Gatoroid  
The Asylum  
Pinnacle Films  
R4 DVD**

Once again The Asylum gives us a creature feature that is cheesy schlock but is also very very funny. "Mockbusters" are a speciality of The Asylum and they have perfected their style to match Roger Corman's productions.



A group of animal liberationist loonies have broken into a lab and stolen a nest of snakes which they have released into the Everglades. The snakes do well, and the Everglades are being menaced by huge snakes that are cutting into the population of alligators and rednecks. Park Ranger Terry O'Hara (ex-singer Tiffany) is becoming increasingly concerned about the declining numbers of alligators. She is being harassed by the group of animal rights activists led by Dr Nikki Riley (another ex-singer Debbie Gibson). Riley does not seem too concerned about the declining numbers of rednecks either. When her fiancée is killed and eaten by a giant python O'Hara starts to become irrational. She decides that since the alligator is the only critter almost big enough to take on the pythons, what she needs is a bigger alligator. She feeds them steroids and the gators start to grow. And grow.

For six months it seems to be working and the gator numbers are recovering, but then the pythons start looking for other food sources again.



The redneck population is again under threat.

O'Hara justifies tampering with the natural order as "What's crazy about this? We're just feeding steroids to gators. What could go wrong?"

Riley is almost as irrational as O'Hara and the two have a confrontation at a fundraising event. Riley knows about the steroids and threatens to reveal O'Hara's plan. The two are too busy having a catfight to notice that the pythons are attacking the guests at the event.

The guests are told "Anyone with a weapon, get it out. Now.". The entire guest group produces a range of guns and the pythons are driven off. Now the giant gators and the huge pythons attack a nearby town. In a neat bit of sly humour a dirigible bearing The Asylum on its side is brought down by a python. The ranger, the activist and a herpetologist work out a plan to lure the creatures to a quarry and there kill them before they can take out the local nuclear power station. Some of the footage looks suspiciously like it has been taken from the earlier Megacroc film, also from The Asylum. This recycling of earlier films is an old Roger Corman trick to keep costs down.

There is one vital thing missing. There are no bikini girls. These are essential to the plot of any good schlock film, and a peek down Tiffany's blouse is no substitute. We do, however, get fairly ordinary CGI, bad acting, a crashing helicopter, and non-stop slaughter. What more could you want? Certainly we don't get a logical plot but who cares?

There are digs at the ladies' previous singing careers. After the bitchfight they look around and Tiffany says "There doesn't seem to be anyone around", words from one of her songs.

We also get a (brief) guest appearance from ex-Monkee Mickey Dolenz, but that can't save the film because he is promptly eaten. Then, just when you think the horror is finally over, we get Tiffany singing a country-style theme song behind the titles. True horror indeed.

**Muckman**  
**Horror Parody**  
**Chemical Burn Entertainment**  
**R1 DVD**

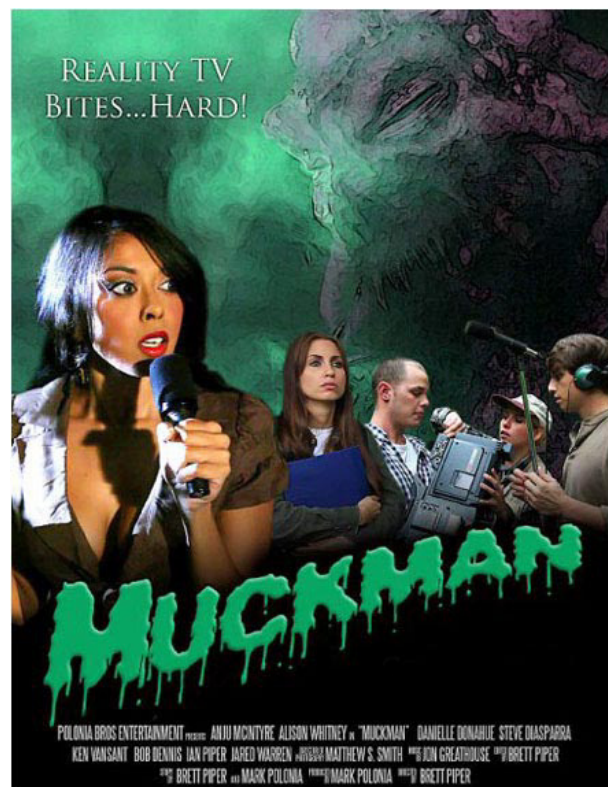
Although it comes close, I can't classify this film as schlock. It's just too good at what it does. No matter that it takes on all the characteristics of the old Swamp Monster films and has all the stereotype characters. We can forgive the crude model work and the stop-motion animation. We can even overlook the nighttime shots when we can see blue sky through the trees. It still stands as a good fun story with a lot of the old fashioned values that made this type of film so popular.

We have the local rednecks, the man-in-rubber-suit monster, the wisecracking half-stoned film crew and a few very attractive women so we can get the compulsory bikini and cleavage shots. We even get a bikini catfight in the river. What more do you need?

Mickey O'Hara produces a TV show based on tracking down monsters. He is not above faking the monsters if necessary, but his latest fakery of a monster called the Muckman is so blatant that his boss wonders if he is still up to the job. The man in the monkey suit playing the Muckman has run into a tree and knocked himself out. On camera. O'Hara's main asset is his attractive presenter

Asia Buchanan (played by the extremely pneumatic and sultry A. J. Khan aka Anju McIntyre) and without her the show will flop. He is given one last chance to film the Muckman. So it's back to the swamp.

Mickey's going to get the footage right this



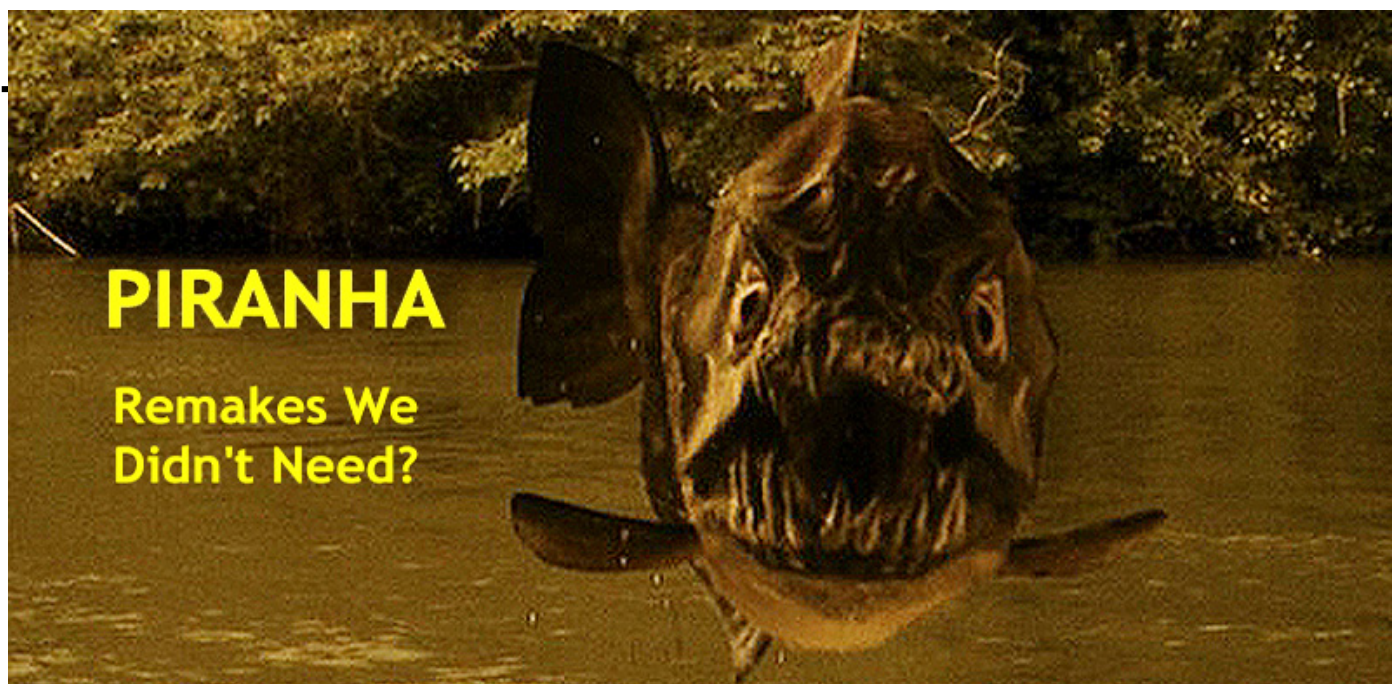
time, but it will still be of a man in a monkey suit. Whether he believes in the Muckman or not doesn't matter, the crew are going to come back to the studio with the needed footage. Apart from Mickey, Asia is the only one in on the scam. The driver Billie (Allison Whitney) suspects something is going on and sets up a camera of her own.

Unknown to all, including Horace, Elmer and Cletus, the rednecks hired to help, there really is a Muckman. When Billie is caught filming the fakery she is pitched into the river to drown but is saved by the Muckman. Now what? Will she survive the monster? Will O'Hara get his just desserts? Will we get more of Asia's cleavage?

The actors are all good at their jobs but the best role is A J Khan as Asia, known as "the princess" by the crew. The important thing about making the film work is that all the staff seem to have put their heart into it. They do not overact but their performances are so typical and perfect for this type of film.

B-grade, yes, but loads of fun.



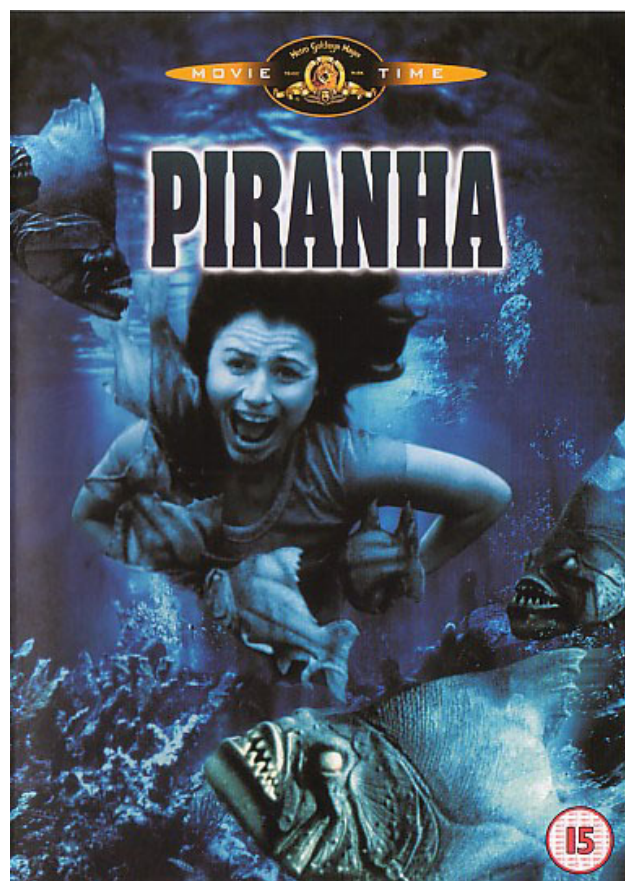


The original Piranha is a 1978 horror / comedy that features a swarm of killer fish. This classic film keeps getting remade or “revisualised”, but most of the remakes don’t seem to be able to lift it far above its original schlock level. It was made by Joe Dante for Roger Corman’s film company, New World Pictures, and is widely regarded as an attempt to cash in on the huge success of the 1975 film Jaws. This is not entirely true. Corman had been making low budget creature features for some years for late night TV and the drive-in circuits, and it is quite possible that Jaws was trying to cash in on Corman’s success. Whichever way it went, Piranha became a cult classic, much to everyone’s surprise.

And there it should have finished, but you just can’t keep a vicious little fish down. The story has been regularly remade. The most recent version came out in late 2010 and seems to have regained the light comic touch while doing a good job of building the horror.

### Piranha (1978)

The movie was a harmless if silly little story about a leak from a secret Government research establishment. A mad scientist is developing man eating fish as a weapon of war for use in Vietnam. Two teenagers find the apparently abandoned secret lab. They take advantage of what appears to be a swimming pool to have a quick skinny dip. This satisfies the first need of such films – a bit of nudity or near-nudity. The teenagers are attacked by the



piranhas. That’s the second need – blood – taken care of.

An insurance investigator searching for the kids, and her alcoholic guide, find the installation complete with strange varieties of fish in jars. She decides to drain the pool to check for clues and it is this that lets the piranhas loose. The half-insane emaciated scientist tells them piranhas were stored in the pool, being developed for use in the war to tolerate the colder





Vietnamese rivers. Naturally they don't believe him but as they head downriver they begin to find half eaten bodies. The fish are heading for the Lost River Water Park, the local tourist trap. The Army doesn't really want people to know what it has been up to so the investigator and her guide are arrested, but they escape to spread the news. Meanwhile the piranha attack the summer camp. Here is where the horror really begins. The massacre of the swimmers takes care of the third and fourth needs, bikinis and slaughter.

The fish are finally poisoned by releasing industrial waste into the river.



One of the silliest parts of this film was the piranha themselves. They hum as they attack, and the water bubbles so we must assume they are also farting vigorously. At least, that's how it seemed to me. This does detract from the horror of each attack.

Piranha made around \$14 million in the U.S. alone, It was a hit in South America as well, where they should have known better.

The cut-down-for-TV version left out most of the comedy parts to stress the horror. This only seems to have increased the popularity of the original, which is still available on DVD.

**Piranha II: The Spawning (1981)**  
**Aka Piranhas**  
**Aka Piranha II : Flying Killers**

If you want to make a sequel you must have a gimmick that the original didn't have. In this







case it was flying piranhas. This was a pet idea of private financier Ovidio Assonitis who put up the funding through Warner Bros. Although Corman was again involved in the production his original contract had stipulated only one film, so he had to make this one under Warner Bros' auspices and distribute it through Dimension Films. .

In true Corman style it used large chunks taken from the earlier film. There were all the traditional ingredients – bikini-clad (or unclad) Playmates, lots of blood and boobs and detached limbs, and all the screaming you could want. Apart from this, it had little to recommend it. The director was James Cameron, who thankfully went on the greater things. .

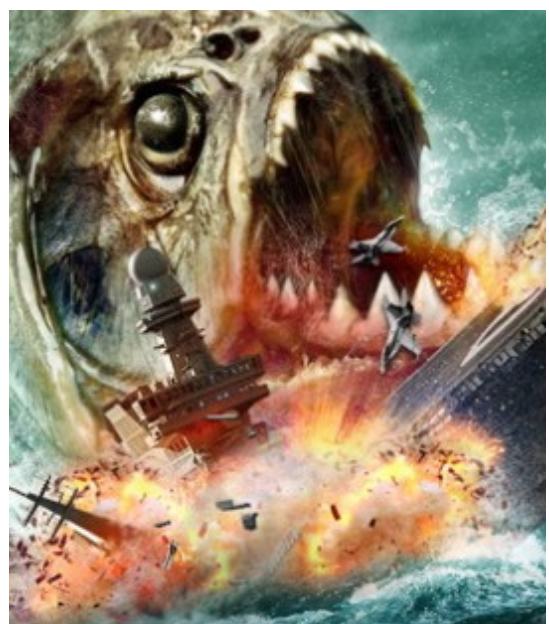
### **MegaPiranha (2010)**

The Asylum is renowned for their “mockbusters” – budget takeoffs of major films. Currently their successful range was mostly creature features like Megashark vs. Giant Octopus. When Alexandre Aja was announced to



do a Piranha remake, what more natural than that The Asylum should beat him to the punch with their own piranha film?

Mega Piranha would have done credit to Roger Corman. It was cheesy, had lots of boobs and blood, and featured the most unlikely piranhas ever seen. The plot was familiar – something in the water of the Orinoco River has caused the piranhas to mutate. They set to work on tour-







ists, locals, politicians and a riverbank town. As they mutate they grow to the size of houses then head for the ocean. We have the ludicrous sight of huge piranhas leaping and jumping downstream then reentering the water with hardly a splash. The Venezuelan Army's reaction is to blow the fish up but that doesn't work. Naturally the piranhas head for Florida where all the bikinis are. Along the way they attack U.S. naval shipping. In Florida they leap out of the water and crash through tall buildings causing great destruction. Why people would genetically mutate killer fish to this size is not explained. It must be those evil scientists again. The U.S. Army then goes one step further – it plans to nuke the fish.

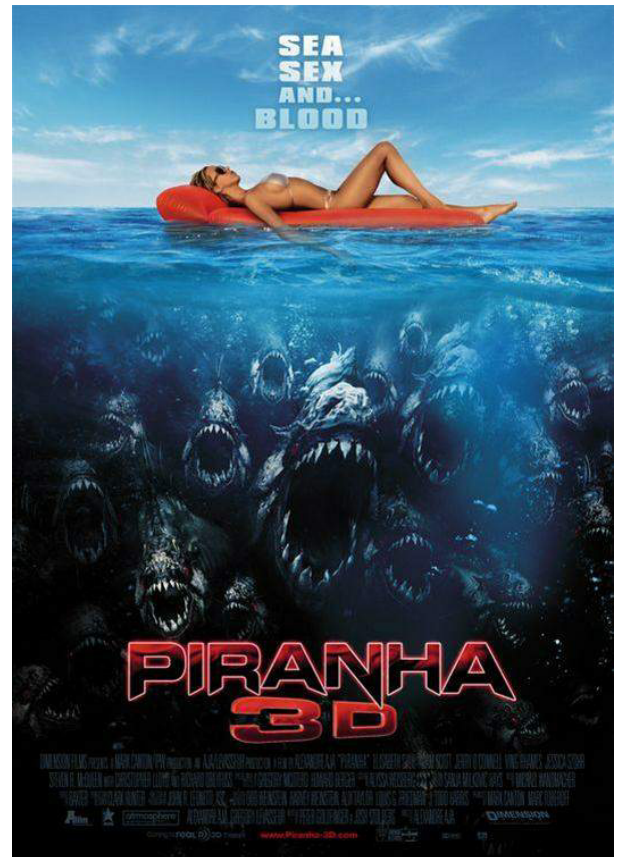
If that wasn't bizarre enough The Asylum hired ex-80s pop star Tiffany to team up with ex-Brady Bunch Barry Williams to play leading roles. A bit more nudity would have done wonders to improve the film. So would having the piranhas eat all the actors at the start. The CGI is awful, the editing is annoying. At least the piranhas growl rather than hum. The film establishes another fishy cliché.

The fish can leap out of the water and take out a helicopter. In spite of its defects the piranha attacks are true horror scenes.

Any humour in the film is due to its incredibly low quality plot, acting and CGI.

### **Piranha (2010) Piranha 3D**

Alexandre Aja finally got his film onto the market after delays caused by the studio's requirement that it now be filmed in 3D. Once again it was distributed by Dimension Films. Aja based the film on earlier script from Josh Stolberg and Pete Goldfinger. He explains, "My goal is



*not to remake Piranha, but to create a completely new adventure paying homage to all the creature films ....I am very proud to follow the path of Joe Dante and James Cameron in the Piranha franchise and look forward to working with Greg Levasseur to write, produce, and direct such a fun and gory thrill ride."* Rather surprisingly, he succeeded.

All the usual ingredients are there in abundance, including a wet T-shirt contest. Aja used more than 7,000 gallons of blood and seems rather proud of that.

This time the piranhas are a prehistoric type that have been trapped in an underground lake

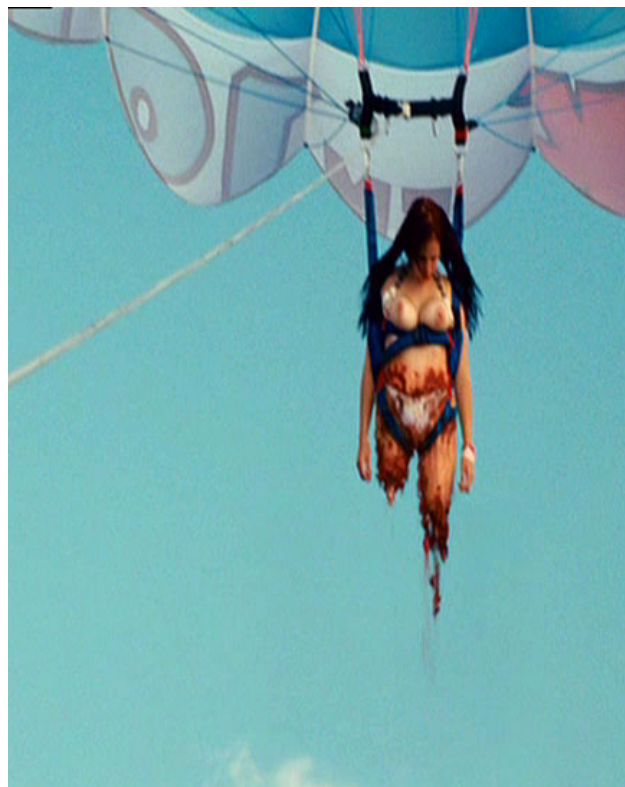






until freed by an earthquake. The film follows Joe Dante's original story after a fashion but you soon get confused about whether you are watching Piranha or a Jaws remake. Aja lived up to his promise to pay homage, but he didn't forget that the film was supposed to be funny as well as horror.

It is Spring Break at Lake Victoria in Arizona. The lake is well stocked with nubile young things wearing miniscule bikinis. Jake is a local lad who is hired as a deckhand by Derrick Jones, a porno film producer who is showing far too much interest in Jake's girlfriend. Then the piranha attack. The film alternates between



comedy and black horror in equal amounts. One of the writers commented that Aja had directed "...some of the most disgusting, disturbing images I've ever seen on film".

Some of these images are also the funniest. I liked the police deputy standing in the water fighting off the ravenous piranhas with an out-board motor. As he slices and dices the piranha they are doing the same to him from behind and he gradually becomes a lot shorter. I also liked the fate of the film director but I'm not going to give it away.

Overall this is probably the best film of the franchise. It should now come to a weary close, but in a last moment of horror we hear that Piranha 2 – 3D has now been announced.





**Tucker n Dale Vs Evil  
Comedy Horror  
Icon Film Distribution  
R4 DVD**

At first I thought that this was going to be yet another of those “bunch of students versus homicidal hillbillies” films. I was really pleasantly surprised. Obviously the writers, Morgan Jurgensen and Eli Craig, have had enough of the genre as well. In this film they have reversed the roles of hillbillies and students and in the process lampooned every cliché that this genre is usually loaded with.

Tucker and his big, amiable, socially retarded mate Dale are heading up into the woods to do some renovation work on a holiday cabin Tucker has bought. They stop at a remote backwoods service station where they are noticed by a group of students also headed into the woods for a holiday. Naturally, having seen too many hillbilly movies, they find Tucker and Dale intimidating. Tucker urges Dale to go and try to speak to one of the girls who has caught his eye. Dale is shy around women and makes a complete mess of it – or perhaps it's the scythe he is carrying at the time that scares them. The students go skinny-dipping in the lake, as they always do in this sort of film, and one girl hits her head and is knocked unconscious. She is a distance from her friends who don't notice, so Dale, who is out on the lake fishing with Tucker, rescues her and they take her back to their cabin to sleep off her concussion. They leave a message at the kids'



campsite ‘We have got ur friend’. This, of course is open to misinterpretation and the students decide they will have to rescue their friend.

The rescue is a series of stuffups. Student after student dies horribly in accidents of their own making, but in such a way that it will look bad for Tucker and Dale. One student tries to attack Tucker and dives headfirst into a woodchipper when Tucker reaches down to pick up the next load for the chipper. Another impales himself on a sharp branch. The girl they are trying to rescue is getting on with Dale and they are digging a pit for a new toilet. The students read this as Dale is making her dig her own grave. One student attacks with a spear and impales himself. The girl is once again knocked unconscious.







Tucker surmises that the kids must be members of some sort of suicide pact. It's the only reason the two baffled hillbillies can think of to explain the number of students who are gruesomely killing themselves. It's only looking worse for Tucker and Dale as the body count mounts.

As usual for these films there are guns, axes, chainsaws and nubile girls. We don't get much nudity or even bikinis, unfortunately.

The situation worsens when the local policeman dies in an accident in the almost-derelict cabin. One student snaps and grabs the of-

ficer's gun and starts shooting at the two men. From then on it's homicidal students versus likable, innocent rednecks.

It's a wonderful black comedy. Tyler Labine plays Dale with just the right amount of shyness, but it is Alan Tudyk (remember him as Wash, the pilot in the *Firefly* series?) who carries the story. Jesse Moss also does a good job as the obsessed and unstable student who wilfully misinterprets every event and has a dark secret in his past. Just as zombie films really ended with the *Shaun of the Dead* parody, hopefully this will finish the killer hillbilly genre.



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**The Warrior's Way**  
**Sony**  
**R4 DVD**

If you are looking for an East Meets West film with a credible plot and good acting, don't bother to read any further. Don't expect a serious film like *Red Sun* or even the dreadful TV series *Kung Fu*. What you're going to get in *The Warrior's Way* is an unbelievable plot, inexplicable settings, posing swordsmen, flying ninjas, and spectacular slaughter scenes galore. Forget how bad this film is – just sit back and enjoy it as it tramples on cliché after cliché. There's even a shot of our hero riding (well, walking) off into the sunset!

The Warrior, played by Korean actor Jang Dong Gun, is a top swordsman who is in disgrace for refusing to finish off the last member of a hated



clan, a baby girl. He and the child flee to a remote town in the American Wild West. He will be safe here as his ninja clan will not possibly be able to trace a lone Oriental swordsman carrying a baby. He hopes a friend in the town will give him a job, but the friend has been killed by the local pack of thugs in a raid. He takes over his friend's laundry business.

The town is populated by the remnants of a circus. We are not told what they are doing out there in the middle of nowhere but the skyline is dominated by their huge Ferris Wheel. Most of them are in mortal fear of a return visit from the brutal cowboy gang, especially the girl who becomes the warrior's love interest. He starts training the townspeople to defend themselves.

The cowboys duly return to town in large numbers and the slaughter begins. Just as the townsfolk are getting the upper hand a large group of ninjas appears flying over the town and join in the fray. Cue lots of slaughter between the ninjas and the cowboys. And so on.

The film is more like a comic book than a film plot. It is simplistic, larger than life and simply ignores the holes in the plot. It is, therefore, great fun. The CGI is really good, the action scenes are suitably bloody. The sword scenes are done in the much-clichéd slow motion style so you can see every drop of blood spurting from severed heads and arms, with spraying blood decorating every building within range.

I am sure this film was not meant to be taken too seriously, at least not by Western audiences. Eastern audiences may see something in it that I missed. It is a caricature of the East Meets West genre and in that style it is really well done. Cheap thrills and a laugh a minute.







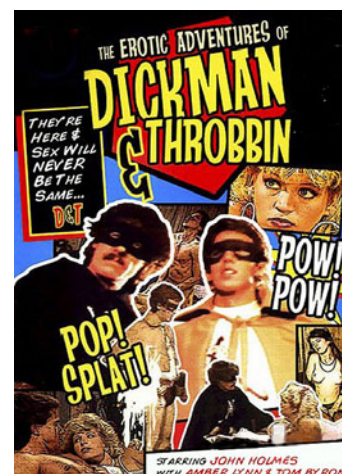
## Superheroes and Pornography

Because of the U.S. copyright laws any film copying a superhero is bound to attract the attention of the company lawyers. There is however scope for parody to be acceptable "as long as the title has artistic relevance to the underlying work and it does not explicitly mislead the consumer as to the source or content of the work." As pornography films flourished in the 1960s and 1970s the Superhero genre was an obvious target for porn spoofs. There was little similarity between the original films and the porn parodies except the name and often a superhero-lookalike costume. Even mainstream films got the treatment in films like the *Sexworld* (1978) parody of the successful *Westworld*. The early parodies were often quite well-made films. Gradually they became just quickie porno knockoffs to capitalise on a big name.

Two notable Superhero porn films were *Dickman and Throbbin* and the spoof *Souperman* (1976). Although *Dickman and Throbbin* was a fairly serious attempt at a film, *Souperman* was more than the film companies would stand and they sued the producers. A spinoff called *Super-*

*woman* also got the legal treatment and was only reissued after being renamed *Ms Magnificent*. The "S" logo was removed from her cape and all mentions of "Superwoman" were bleeped out. The film starred Desiree Cousteau. I find it hard to imagine her as a superheroine after seeing her in *Pretty Peaches*, but I guess heroines weren't always picked for their acting abilities. Ms Cousteau had other attributes that made her suitable for the role.

*Dickman and Throbbin* (1986) managed to get out before the lawyers caught it. It was quite a good, campy film in the style of the TV series. Producer Jerome Tanner cast John Holmes, Tom Byron and Amber Lynn in the main roles. One of the film's great moments came when







Holmes, as Dickman, says to his sidekick "Yes, Throbbin, this calls for ..... DOUBLE PENE-TRATION !". How he delivered this line without cracking up is hard to imagine. As for casting Amber Lynn as a virgin rock singer ....

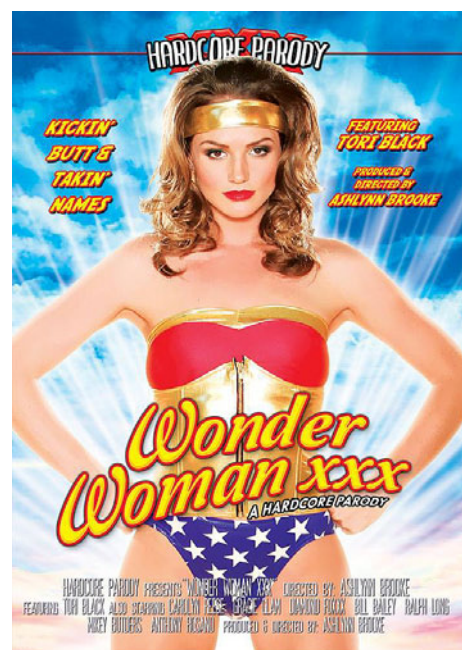
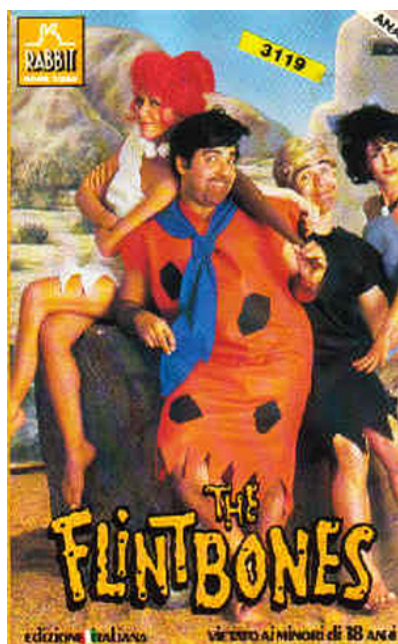
Perhaps the pick of the lot was *Flesh Gordon* (1974). It started out to be more pornographic than it finished up, with great lines and a serious helping of comedy – a true parody that just happened to be erotic as well. A long necked dinosaur-type creature with a distinctive glans-shaped head is menacing our heroes.



Dr Flexi Jerkoff tells Flesh and Dale Ardent that it must be "some sort of penisaurus".

I never managed to get hold of *The Flintbones*, starring Ron ("The Hedgehog") Jeremy. I can only imagine what it would have been like.

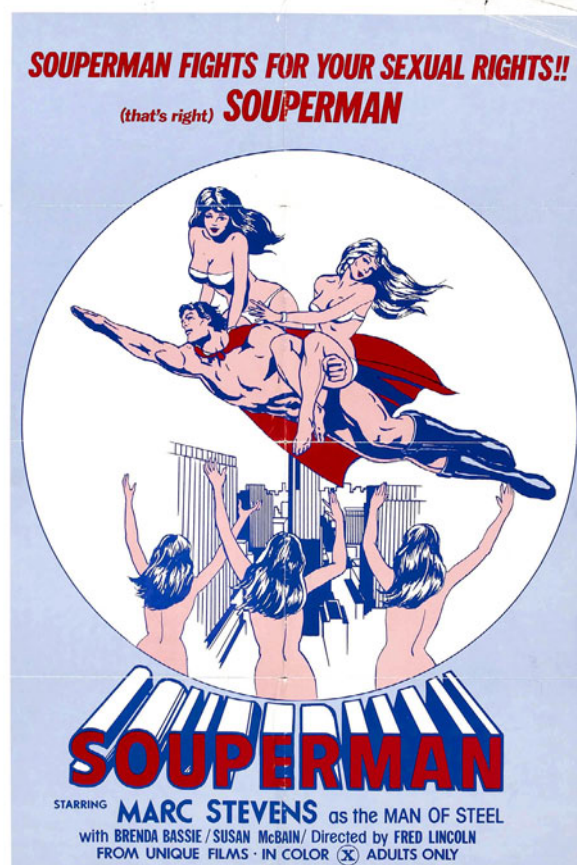
The genre seemed to die out after this as porn moved towards the unimaginative and fairly plotless style of today where the money shots were more important than making a real film.







In the last few years, though, there has been a revival in the older style. Vivid Entertainment started the ball rolling with *The Incredible Hulk: A XXX Porn Parody*. Note the key word "parody". As a parody the film no longer infringes on DC Comics' copyright. Vivid has more titles planned or being made at the moment, and reports indicate that they will be high quality productions. Vivid has gone so far as to start a new company, Vivid-Superhero, to produce these films.



Mile High Media is now filming *Wonder Woman XXX: A Hardcore Parody*. This will be a lower budget production than the Vivid films, but still sounds like fun.

Batman has already received the budget XXX treatment in *BatFXXX: Dark Night Parody* from Bluebird. BatFXXX, Robina and Batchick must save Gotham City from an array of villains, but their technique is a little different to the old "Biff ! Kapow!" style. It is perhaps a little more like current mainstream porn in that when the plot is exhausted it all finishes with a mass orgy.

Extreme Comixxx has now entered the fray with its version of *Justice League XXX*. I want to see this as it features Ron Jeremy as the Penguin. This short, fat, balding, hairy little porn star is perfect for the part. Danny de Vito, eat your heart out !

Even if American mainstream cinema is going through a major decline at the moment there is one area where it can still find success.

**42nd Street Pete's  
Busty Babe Bonanza  
Vintage Erotica  
Secret Key Motion  
Pictures  
R1 DVD**

For this release Pete goes back to the "loops", three to five minute sexy 8mm film clips that were looped continuously in a cinema, sold to the home market or more likely showed on a nickel-in-the-slot peepshow. His selection includes many of the last of the loops before 8mm gave way to 16mm, then to 35mm feature films that could be shown in cinemas.

By this time the cameramen were no longer shy of showing "pussy shots" but the loops were still a long way from the porn of later years. They were simply titillating rather than pornographic. Still, we see examples of girl-on-girl, bondage and so on, and a rather puzzling loop of a girl and goats. There is also a loop on the ever-popular theme of nudist camps.

Pete's selection includes the legendary Uschi Digard, a very well-endowed young lady, in four of the loops. We also get a clip from Candy Samples who starred in many early porn films and Arline Hunter who was a worthy competitor in the size stakes.



We also get a loop that Pete asserts may have been a young Marilyn Monroe. He is uncertain, but the girl certainly resembles Marilyn.

Don't expect a plot in these loops. You will be disappointed if you are looking for character development or any of the conventional film elements. The girls were employed to roll around on the bed or just stand there and sort of wobble.

As usual the quality is poor, the result of too many trips through the projector. There is no sound, as was standard for these loops. The loops may look quaint now but they have a place in the history of erotica and freedom of choice.





**42nd St Pete's  
Extreme  
Bondage  
Collection  
Vintage Erotica  
After Hours  
Cinema  
R1 DVD**

For this 2 DVD set Pete gives us a specialist area of early erotica. We get twenty loops, mostly visualisations of the old "Roped and Raped" style of novel, from Tao Films.

These mostly put an unwilling girl into a situation where a predator could tie her up. The rest of the film was usually of the girl rolling around helplessly trying to free herself while the camera lovingly explored each knot and rope. In this respect the films were more fetish than pornography. Other forms of restraint and accessories like handcuffs, leg spreaders, etc often featured as well.

Popular themes included suspending a trussed woman from a convenient hook in the ceiling (thoughtful American homebuilders?), slavery, the masked intruder and the bondage dream that becomes reality. The titles reflect the content – Sold Into Slavery, Bought For Bondage, Maniac In My Bedroom, and so on.

A lobby group called Women Against Pornography managed to get a law passed that forbade any act of sexual penetration while the woman was tied up. This was now defined as rape. Emphasis was therefore on keeping the captive



bound and getting her into that position in the first place. Much fondling, spanking etc followed but no actual penetration. In many the attacker simply disappeared once his work was done. Some loops had a woman as the attacker. What WAP thought of this is not recorded.

Pete remembers BDSM (that's "Bondage and Discipline" and "Sadomasochism" ) fondly, especially in the days before WAP when the sex was kinky and less tame. You won't see those loops in this compilation. As the style became popular bigger producers moved into the market and it all became invested with the bland sameness that haunted American porn (and still does).

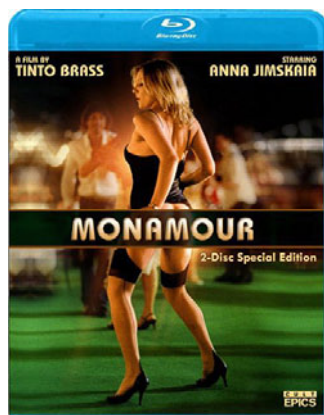
The style was also popular in Japan. Pink Eiga has re-released films like Shogun's Joy of Torture which features bondage extensively. Unlike the American loops shown in this compilation the Japanese films were better produced and featured a plot that didn't stop once the rope-work was done.

As with many of Pete's compilations the quality of the loops is poor, reflecting how much use they had while they were popular. As usual After Hours Cinema has included their detailed sleeve notes.



**Monamour**  
**Erotica**  
**Cult Epics**  
**Blu-Ray**

*Italian, English subtitles*



Although the plot is not original nor particularly interesting, veteran director Tinto Brass gives us an erotic masterpiece through his use of attractive women and first class cinematography. The film drifts along happily, offering many opportunities to admire Anna Jimskaya's mature but absolutely luscious body, in Brass's usual style. There is no shyness here, though; no tastefully arranged vase of flowers to hide the naughty bits. Everything is revealed to us in a way that almost but not quite crosses the line into softcore pornography.

Marta and Dario have been married for six months and Marta is becoming dissatisfied with their sex life. Dario is obsessed with his work, leaving early in the morning and returning home worn out. Sex such as it is is passionate but brief and Marta wants more. One day while touring a museum and admiring the erotic statuary and paintings she meets a Frenchman, Leon, who gropes her gently, arousing all her urges. She meets him again at a party and they start a relationship. She writes it all in her diary. What happens when Dario finds the diary?

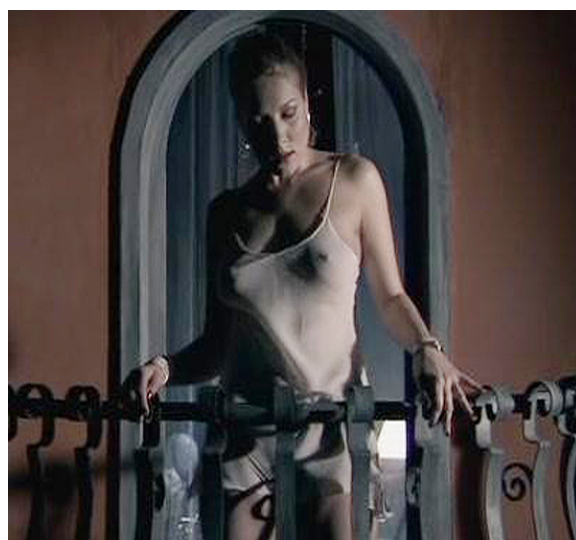
Brass is somewhat obsessed with female body parts and we get many tasteful close-ups. His women are very attractive, but not in the American huge-boobs style. They are ordinary girls who have only become more attractive and ele-



gant as they have matured into women. Anna Jimskaya is a perfect example. The key word through the entire film seems to be "tasteful". Even the sex scenes are done with a style that I think is what stops the film veering into pornography.

A bonus short film in the two-disc set is "Kick the Cock". It means, apparently, "peek in the kitchen" or something similar. It is an accurate description of the film which seems to consist of two attractive (naturally) young women who are apparently housemaids or something being eyeballed by Brass himself, sitting behind his desk in the kitchen and contentedly puffing his cigar. I would be content, too. That's it. No plot at all. Its only saving grace is once again its very attractive actresses. This is simply a self-indulgent voyeur film.

If you aren't interested in huge mammaries and money shots, these are two beautifully made films for the connoisseur of attractive women.



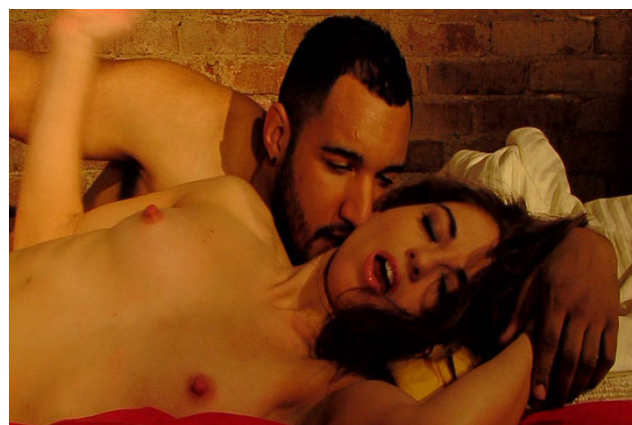


**The Sex Merchants**  
**Erotica**  
**Independent**  
**Entertainment**  
**R1 DVD**

This is an unusual film in that it is made in the old style, with attractive, natural-looking women and a decent plot. There are no money shots, just quite good acting and plenty of tastefully filmed nudity. Thus I have classed the film as Erotica rather than Pornography. I don't know if there is still a market for this sort of film. I hope so, because it is a pleasure to watch.

Writer / Director John Niflheim has captured perfectly the feel of the older films. Lets start with the plot. Peter is a freelance photographer who sells his work to a sleazy sexploitation magazine. He does fairly well, but the money he makes goes on drugs and paying off his models. He is known as a "hands-on" photographer, and the more attractive models usually finish up in bed with him – for money. His sex life is pretty good, but as a result he is always broke. He also suffers from a pushy, nagging mother.

He is becoming quite fond of one of his models, but Peter's world starts to fall apart when she suggests moving in with him. This will definitely cramp his style with other girls. He is not ready



for that sort of commitment yet. His drug supplier is also pressing him for money, since he runs up quite a drug bill each month. Then the magazine editor breaks the news that he will not be buying Peter's photos any more – there are plenty of aspiring young models out there who will pose for free purely for the publicity. There is only one way out for Peter.

The young ladies are all quite attractive in a non-enhanced way. We get many close-ups to prove this. Niflheim's cinematography is simply beautiful. His command of colour and lighting turn the seduction scenes into something quite stunning, really showing off the women. The quality is such that I wonder if the movie was shot on film. It seems to be crisper and sharper than video.

The film's attention to classical values rather than sexual technique gives us a story that has more of a French feel. It is a visual pleasure, not just because of the women.



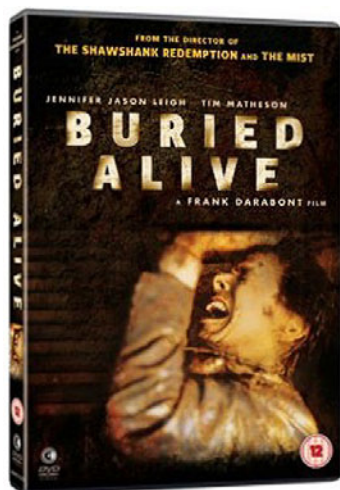
**Buried Alive**  
**Horror**  
**Second Sight**  
**R2 DVD**

This style of horror has been well-covered over the years. Director Frank Darabont has already produced one version in 1990 for cable TV and a different version was reviewed in Synergy some months ago.

This new remake is based heavily on his 1990 television program and has a more ordinary setting than the traditional horror versions.

Clint is a successful builder in a quiet country town. He leads a quiet home life in the town he loves and goes fishing with the Sheriff. His wife Joanna, a city girl, is bored with the country life and is having an affair with a local doctor. The doctor is an undesirable type, heavily in debt, and he has convinced Joanna to kill her husband, sell off the business and assets, and they will then leave town and live happily ever after. So he says, but his other plans for Joanna become evident later in the film.

Joanna fumbles the vial containing the murder drug and spills some, so Clint only gets a partial dose. It is enough to convince everyone that he is dead. She gives him a quick budget funeral with no embalming and an old coffin and starts



selling off Clint's business. Clint awakes and manages to break out of the cheap coffin. Dazed and not completely recovered from the poison, he makes his way back to his home to hear the doctor and Joanna planning their next moves. As he recovers he makes his move. Now it is their turn to experience the horror of being trapped.

Although the plot is well worn Darabont has the skill to direct it as a sensible, realistic horror film. He has to his credit directed *The Green Mile*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Mist* so this is a not a cheap amateur production. Good direction, good acting and skilful cinematography make a big difference. As the film moves from the horror of being buried to the savagery of revenge we are with Clint all the way.





**Closed For The Season**  
**Horror**  
**MTI Home Video**  
**R1 DVD**

Kristy has gone back to an old amusement park where she lost a teddy bear as a kid. The park is now closed but strange things are going on. The park seems to be infested with monsters and ghosts, memories of the park when it was in its heyday, and she is trapped there. She is accompanied by James, a local man who seems to have his own connection with the park from way back.

Their attempts to escape from the park seem to confuse reality with their deepest fears. What is real in this environment? Who or what is playing with their realities? It seems the park itself may have come back to life, and wants someone to amuse, or to amuse it. Its methods, though, are cruel and often bloody. It can resurrect all the people who have died on the grounds over the decades it has been in use, ranging from a Civil War general's victims to a kid thrown from the roller coaster by a demented teenager.

The story becomes disjointed and fragmented



as we try to work out what is going on. It is worth staying with the story, however, if only for the sight of Kristy in her well-filled tank top. How much of the story is reality and how much is in their minds is unclear as we jump between scenes. This may be deliberate on the part of the writer but it doesn't make the story any easier to follow. The writer also didn't give the actors much to work on as far as developing their characters is concerned and it is hard to feel much empathy with them.

Apart from those gripes the film has moments that will make you jump in your seat and enough tension to keep you on edge right through the performance. There is blood galore but it doesn't get in the way of the plot. The film is overall a good example of how good a budget film can be.



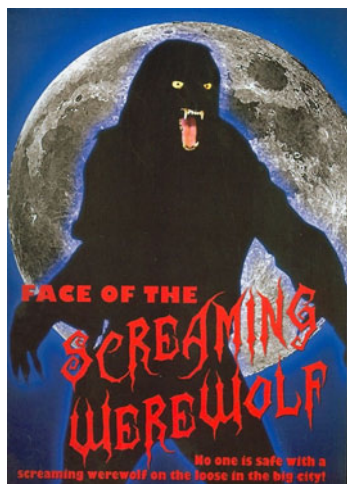
**Face of the Screaming Werewolf**  
**Vintage Horror**  
**Cheezyflicks**  
**R0 DVD**

It's hard to describe just how awesomely bad this 1964 film is. For a start it was mostly cobbled together from two Mexican films, La Casa Del Terror and La Momia Aztec.

Producer Jerry Warren then added a few scenes of his own to improve the disjointed narrative. It didn't work. Lon Chaney Jr plays the wolfman for the last time, and after this film I'm not surprised. A factual background wasn't really important so we have Aztec priestesses screeching operatically. It's hilarious.

The plot is bad, too. A woman has been hypnotised in the lab by the usual spiralling whirly thing into regressing to her former life as an Aztec priestess. She tells of a hidden chamber in an Aztec pyramid, so her American scientist friend takes them there to find the lost treasures that undoubtedly lie in such a chamber. They find two mummies, one an ancient Aztec priest and the other a more modern man. They bring both mummies back to the U.S. where one is stolen by a rival scientist. Both are revived. The stolen one is a werewolf, The other mummy is revived and they start the usual killing spree.

I don't recall seeing an explanation of how the werewolf finished up mummified in the pyramid,



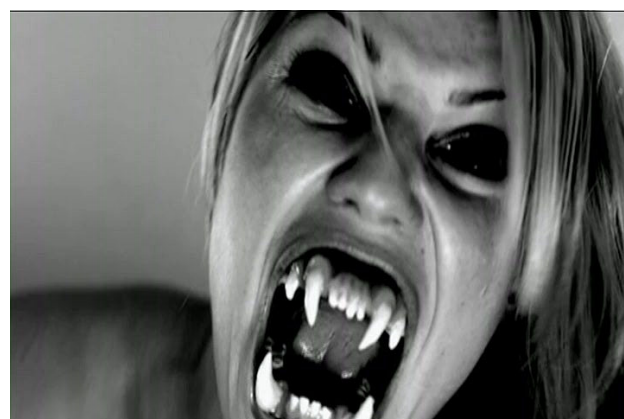
or indeed what it was doing in the Yucatan (their home ground is Europe). I don't recall the Aztecs having priestesses either, even if their main purpose seems to be doing "exotic" dances.

I can only assume this is the sixties equivalent of the current breed of budget horror films, but without the class and style. It's hilarious.

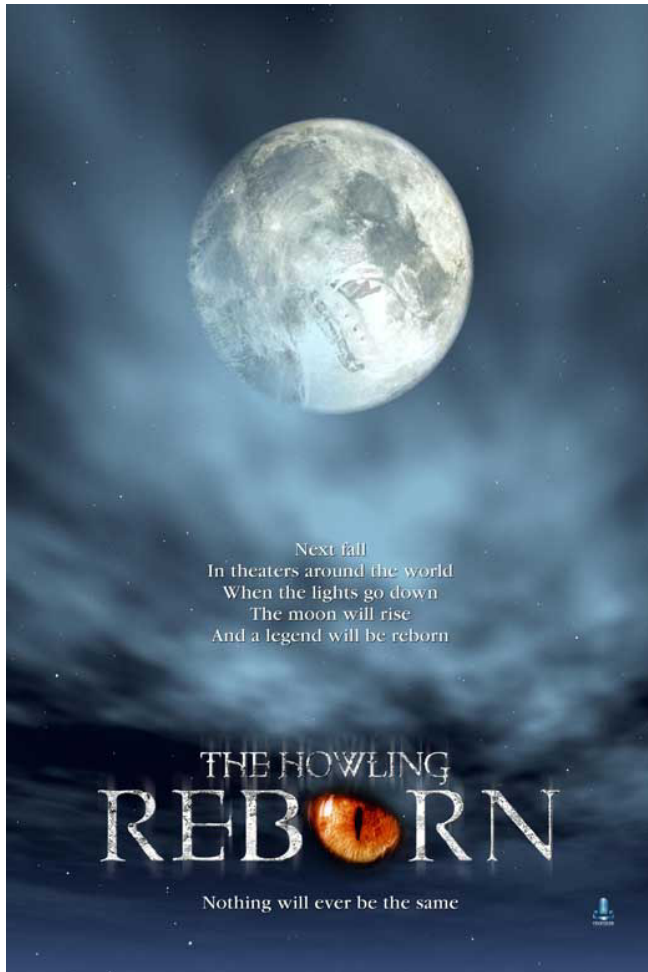
**The Howling: Reborn**  
**Horror**  
**Anchor Bay Entertainment**  
**R4 DVD**

There was probably no good reason to make this film after The Howling franchise had run its course of sequels, so what does it have that makes it worth redoing? Mainly it is now aimed at the sort of market that the Twilight series went for – outing horror genres into a more teenaged context. So how did it turn out?

Our hero is Will Kidman, a slightly Harry Potter-ish nerd who is the target for one of the school bullies. The girl he is interested in is Eliana,

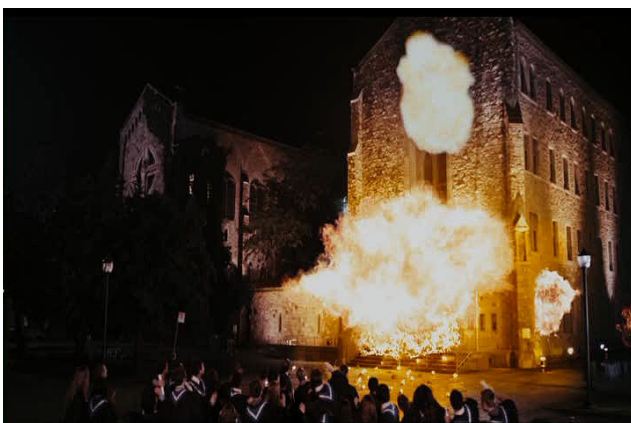






who is currently the bully's girlfriend. So far it sounds like one of those interminable American High School nerd-makes-good films, but it soon turns dark. Will discovers he is part werewolf on his mother's side and the werewolf in him is now awakening. He deals with the bully, then finds a mutual attraction with Eliana.

There is a clan of werewolves operating in the school basements, where they keep their victims for the great rising and conquest when werewolves will take their place in society – at



the top of the food chain. Will is astounded to find his mother is leading the pack. Mother is not pleased, especially when Will tells her "Your boy likes his girlfriend better than his Mummy" and Will has to release his suppressed werewolf urges to protect Eliana. Can he do it? How can he stop werewolves taking over the world?

The film is far better than I had expected. The rise of the horror element is carefully developed, the plot is plausible (as far as a story about werewolves goes, anyway) and by the end of the film it is full-fledged horror rather than high school fluff. The CGI is mostly quite good, especially the few full shots of the werewolves.

Will it appeal to teenagers? I'm not sure, since in many ways it is a parody of teenager films. As an example we have the girl delivering the address at the graduation ceremony. She talks in vacuous clichés and makes a mockery of the event. Meanwhile Will and his girlfriend are fighting for their lives inside the school. And none of the students have the sense to get in out of the rain.

It is not really a remake of *The Howling*, since it is considerably more lightweight and has less horror, but it's good entertainment in its own right.

## The Lost Future Pinnacle Films R4

The Lost Future is an interesting film, perhaps a little clichéd but none the worse for that. It is a typical Pinnacle film, fairly low budget but decent production values and quite reasonable acting.



Scientists have tried to bring back extinct animals but have also inadvertently released an ancient virus. If a human contracts the virus they will die or turn into a subhuman.

Mankind has all but died out and the survivors have formed small bands with stone age technology. They fight not only the monsters that were recreated but the subhuman tribes as well.

One human tribe is run by “the ancients”, represented by a religious lunatic whose response to danger is to pray. This is surprisingly ineffective against a tribe of bloodthirsty subhumans. The tribe is trapped in a cave, and the subhumans will eventually get in and slaughter the humans. Savan and Kaleb, two of the tribe’s hunters, are still loose in the forest.



Kaleb is a good tracker and unlike most of the tribe he can read. They head out of the area and look for help or shelter, and meet Amal. Amal knows of a yellow powder discovered many years ago by Savan’s father. He was bringing it back to their village when he was attacked and the powder and the formula were stolen. It is now in the hands of a large tribe living in an old derelict city, where the head man Gagan doles it out sparingly to his henchmen. Gagan and his men can’t read so they can’t make any more powder from the formula.

There follows the usual fights, general skulking around, and test of loyalty.

Although we have seen a lot of this before (the post-apocalyptic theme is quite common) the film is well done with good CGI where it counts.



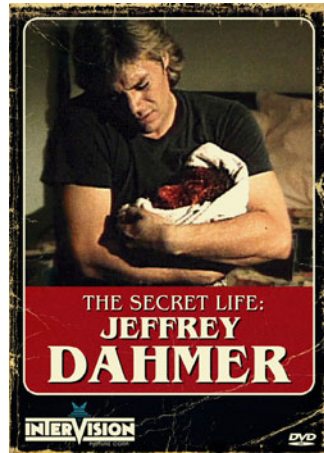


**The Secret Life:  
Jeffrey Dahmer  
Suspense / Horror  
Intervision  
CAV Distributors  
R1 DVD**

Jeffrey Dahmer was the product of a broken home, who finished up living with his grandmother. From the age of about ten he began to dissect roadkill and gradually moved on to stranger practices. As he grew older he started drinking heavily. He started hunting young men and killed four of them secretly while he lived with his grandmother. She finally asked him to leave when she could no longer stand his argumentative personality, his drunkenness, and the strange smells coming from the basement where he killed and dismembered his victims.

When he moved into his own apartment his killings reach spree proportions. He particularly targeted gays. His practices widened to include rape, torture, necrophilia and strange experiments like injecting acid into the brain of victims to create zombies. The bodies were now being disposed of in a barrel of acid. Although other tenants complained about the smell he continued to kill and dismember young men.

He nearly ran into trouble when a young victim was unconscious and he left the unit to get more beer. On his return the young man had escaped to the footpath outside the units and was incoherent. Dahmer told police he was the young man's boyfriend, and the youngster had trouble with drugs. Amazingly the police gave



him back the youth without any further investigation. In another near escape he was caught with an underage youth in his unit. Although he protested that the boy was over 18 he was charged and put on parole and a five year bond on condition that he gave up drinking and stayed away from underage boys. His truculent attitude to his parole officer suggests that he didn't learn much from this, and he continued drinking. He knew, though, that the end must come sooner or later.

He committed nearly twenty known murders before being caught. Although he was a strong man when attacking a victim, he picked one man who was even stronger. This one escaped and called the police. They found body parts in the fridge and the acid barrel with a body in it. They found the skull of one of his victims, and photos of others.

The film stars Carl Crew as Dahmer and he plays the part strongly. There are few gory scenes, but the viewer's imagination and Dahmer's monologue will fill in the dreadful details. The story is narrated from Dahmer's point of view in an autobiographical style. It is very hard to form any sort of involvement with Dahmer, however. He appears to be almost emotionless and amoral, but still knows he is being driven deeper into his own world. At the end of the film he half-rationalises that "I should have stayed with God. I tried and failed and I created a holocaust. I know society will never be able to forgive me.... I pray God will forgive me." (Dahmer's own words)

Between 1978 and 1991 Dahmer killed seventeen men and boys, for which he was sentenced to 17 consecutive life sentences. A further murder turned up a year later.

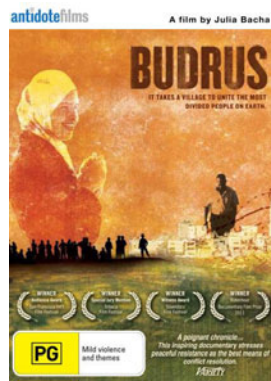


**Budrus**  
Antidote Films  
R4 DVD

Mention the Israeli – Palestinian conflict and we think of what we have seen on TV – stonethrowing gangs, rocket attacks, suicide bombers, tanks rolling through Palestinian villages, air attacks on the strongholds of the anti-Israel militant groups. There is another facet rarely seen - the plight of ordinary Palestinians caught in a war, not of their own making, who are trying to scratch out an existence as best they can.

This documentary does not go deeply into the complex politics. It is sufficient to say that years of Palestinian suicide bombers and rocket attacks have killed hundreds of Israelis and they feel the only way to stop the bombers is to build a great fence along their border with Palestine to control Palestinian access to Israel. Over the years “Palestinian” has become synonymous with “terrorist”, but as we see here that is not the case. The fence is feasible since the Israelis occupy much of the Palestinian territory. It was proposed to pass through the little Palestinian village of Budrus. This would separate the village from its only source of income, the olive orchards. Some trees have been in the same family for generations. It may even have damaged the cemetery. What could the villagers do about it?

They were not particularly politically-minded, just concerned about their future. It takes a long



while for an olive tree to bear fruit and planting new orchards was out of the question. A community leader, Ayed Morrar, organised passive resistance to the construction crew. This involved sitting in front of the bulldozers, blocking access roads and olive trees and harassing the small contingent of Israeli troops sent to guard the construction crew. A lot of restraint was shown on both sides. Success seemed unlikely but his daughter organised a group of village women to join the men on the front line. For a while this seemed to quieten the situation and a negotiated settlement may have been possible but the villagers were soon joined by the usual rent-a-crowd that is attracted to such events. Sorry, that should be “international activists”. The group included some Israelis, which was hailed as solidarity between the two peoples. Well-meaning they may have been but their presence heightened the tensions.





Their confrontational tactics led to the Israelis firing teargas at the crowds as they broke through the thin Israeli lines.

The strife escalated to the point that Israeli troops took over the village and declared a curfew. Groups of stonethrowing teenagers made their appearance, worsening the situation. Someone fired a shot and the little localised war began in earnest.

The documentary is well filmed and shows just how easily such a situation can develop and how hard it is to stop once begun.

The film is not impartial but at least tries in a cursory way to represent the Israeli point of view as well, as expressed by the troops at Budrus. Unfortunately once the flag wavers and religious nuts try to take over the situation it is doomed to fail. There is some evidence of this in the film but largely the villagers managed to control the situation themselves even to the point of berating the stone throwers.

They were lucky in that the more militant Palestinian groups like Hamas apparently did not think Budrus was important so a full-scale shooting war was avoided. This gave both sides time to think, and for passive resistance to develop in other towns affected by the fence. Finally the Israeli government compromised and relocated the fence back onto Israeli land.



The film is rather patchy in places. Morrar's daughter who organised the women is seen a lot in front of the camera but she doesn't seem to take much part in the demonstrations. The Israeli woman soldier who is interviewed regularly is unsure why she is there, and so has little to add. No Israeli leaders are interviewed. The kids throwing stones are not interviewed at all. Are they just doing it for a bit of fun? Are they imitating kids seen on TV in other trouble spots? Do they realise what could happen if they happen to kill an Israeli soldier? The political influences on the village are hardly covered yet it was important enough for the Palestinian Prime Minister to visit the village. The documentary challenges the conventional media view of Palestinians. Patchy and a little one-sided perhaps, but there is enough room for the viewers to make up their own minds.

All the while I kept asking myself why the villagers didn't just ask the Israelis to put a gate in the fence so access to the olive trees could be maintained and the Israelis could keep an eye on who was coming and going. Am I the only one to think that a small amount of common sense may have resolved the problem before it escalated?





**Cane Toads: The Conquest**  
**Documentary**  
**Australia**  
**Pinnacle Films**  
**R4 DVD**

Mark Lewis is a very strange man. He seems to love cane toads. His 1987 film *Cane Toads: An Unnatural History* has a cult following. It describes the history of this ugly, destructive pest since its introduction to Australia to eat cane beetles. An early newsreel trumpeted its arrival with "Welcome, brave champion". The toads,



however, ignored the beetles - they were six feet up on the tops of the cane and cane toads can't fly - but ate its way through everything else it could fit into its mouth. Anything that could eat it was poisoned by the toads and died.

At first the toad was confined to the northern Queensland canefields, but now it's on the move south and across the north. Now, nearly a quarter century later, Lewis has updated his offbeat documentary to reflect the increasingly desperate attempts to stop their advance. Their numbers have increased dramatically following a couple of good wet seasons. They only have two predators in Australia – the motor car and the golf club.

Once again we meet a range of offbeat characters who either love or loathe the ugly creatures – there's no middle ground with a cane toad. One nice little old lady feeds her cane toads cat food to stop them stealing her cat's food. There is the scientist who waxes lyrical about the







cane toad's musical call, and talks of their eyes as if he is writing a love poem. Another northerner takes a more fun approach.

He straps a toad to a skyrocket and launches it, making a lovely explosion and starburst in the sky. Animal cruelty takes a back seat when it comes to cane toads. We catch up with the sad story of Dairy Queen, a huge cane toad that was also a little girl's plaything. She has grown up now but still remembers Dairy Queen with affection.

As usual we see the stranger side of the toads. Dobby the dog has learned to roll the toads over and lick the venom off their bellies. It's not enough to kill the dog but seems instead to give it a pleasant acid trip. In glorious 3D.

There are serious attempts to stop the toads getting across into Western Australia's Kimberley area. Scientists are working on ways to kill the toads en masse, but if the writhing mass of toads filling the isolated Croc Tank Lagoon is anything to go by they are doomed to failure.

Again Lewis includes a lot of "talking heads" in the interviews. Many look a little stilted in front of the camera but that's just the way they are –

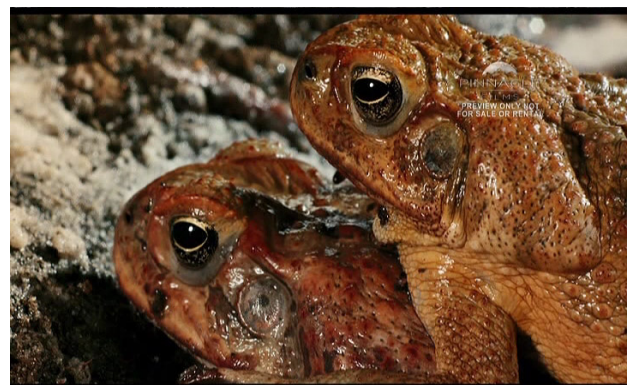


ordinary people trying to come to grips with an extraordinary problem. There are no heroes yet in the battle.

So much of the documentary is just the first film remade with new faces but its emphasis is on the rapid spread of the toads. Toads now have a foothold in so much of Australia that the name "The Conquest" is quite appropriate. The light hearted moments are just there to make the hard news more palatable.

And the hard news is that we are losing the battle. There are simply too many of them, and each breeding season just replaces what has been killed, with a few million spares to spread the population further.

They're coming ! They're coming !



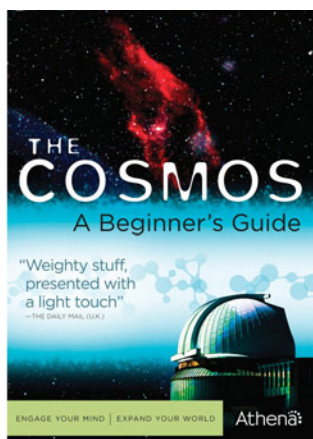
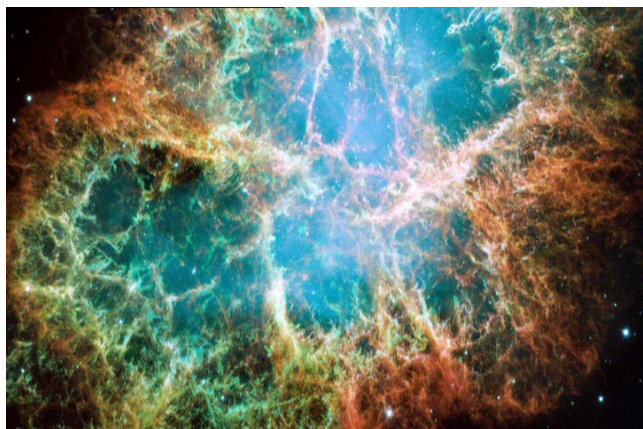


**The Cosmos:  
A Beginner's Guide  
BBC / Acorn Media  
R4 DVD**

Translating science into a product for the mass market is a skill that is still rather rare. To reduce a complex subject to a simpler version without dumbing it down is difficult, and made harder when some of the presenters themselves seem to be talking down to their target audience. Adam Hart-Davies is a good choice of presenter for a complex wide ranging subject like this, apart from his lurid taste in shirts. He almost seems to be on the same level of knowledge as his viewers and we explore the cosmos together, learning as we go. He is helped by a good range of scientists whose plain less-scientific approach is perfect for their subjects. Good quality CGI enhances each subject and makes the information easier to absorb.

The DVD is a big undertaking. Its aim is to show us topics the current state of information on the cosmos and how that information is obtained. Through its various episodes the series takes us from the Big Bang to our current level of knowledge. We can only admire the inventive ways scientists have worked out to develop their knowledge, from the many kinds of telescopes to the people who create suns and solar systems on their computers to see if they are viable. We also touch on the possibility of intelligent life "out there", and how we may ourselves one day break free of earth and move into space.

The search for extra-terrestrial knowledge is a



good example of the thorough approach to each subject. We start by looking at the long running SETI (Search For Extra Terrestrial Intelligence) program. What exactly are they looking for? How will they know if they receive a signal?

This raises a question. If we are hoping to communicate with similar beings in an intelligent way, how do we find them? In another episode we look at the search for earth-like planets and how scientists detect them. Surprisingly there seem to be a lot of candidates.

We move from here to the world of space travel, especially as it applies to our near neighbour planets like Mars. How would people live in Mars' hostile environment? We look at theories of terraforming Mars into an earth like state.

The tools the scientists use are fascinating, from the Large Hadron Collider to WASP, a bank of cameras using conventional cameras and lenses. The interpretation and enhancement of the photos recovers a huge amount of information. We may be earthbound but our technology lets us look much further than the human eye can see.

In the episode "Violent Universe" we look at galaxy-sized explosions, star-eating black holes, and other cosmic phenomena of incredible violence.

Although Hart-Davis has a Doctorate from York University he seems to have found his niche as a TV presenter. He has a lot of experience in this, and his quiet style is a pleasant change from brash American presenters. By contrast he oozes credibility. Breaking each episode into smaller segments is a good approach that makes his presentation easier to absorb. He makes it a pleasure to learn and the youngsters as well as the adults will find it fascinating.

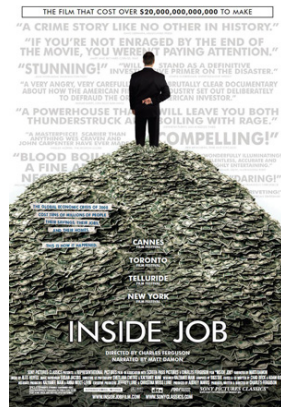


## Inside Job Sony Pictures R4 DVD

The financial crash of 2008 had worldwide repercussions. It is important for our leaders to understand how it happened and how to stop it happening again. Essentially in the United States it became a conflict between greed and regulation in which greed won. It was helped by administrations that simply weren't doing their job.

In the old financial system loans were approved by the partners of the banks who laid out their own money and therefore kept a close eye on the borrowers. As the banks got bigger the level of scrutiny was maintained by law, but that law was under threat by a growing group of economists to whom any form of control was anathema. Gradually these people moved into positions of power in the U.S. government and academia and started to weaken the supervision laws. As the banks went public and collected money for shares from investors, any supervision the investors may have had was eroded.

Meanwhile the banks were looking at ways to increase their earnings. A number of inventive ideas were put into practice. Mostly these involved continuing to issue mortgages but insuring the loan repayments so in the event of a crash the banks would not lose out – at the expense of the insurance companies. To feed the mortgage flow the banks loaned money on “sub-prime” mortgages, those on which a high rate of defaults could be expected. They could charge higher interest rates for these. Along the way



everyone made a big profit or big bonuses. It seemed the bubble in these new “financial products” would never burst.

It could only have worked if the investors were satisfied that the loans were safe, and the credit rating companies, especially Standard and Poors and Moodys, took an active part in this. They gave AAA credit ratings to products that were decidedly dodgy and took a good commission for a favourable rating. A former managing director of Moody's points out that had accurate ratings been given the ratings agency could have stopped the money flow to the banks and financiers. The current heads of the agencies took shelter behind the First Amendment allowing freedom of speech and said that their ratings were simply opinions.

In 2004 the FBI warned of financial crimes being committed. As usual nothing was done. The international financial people including the International Monetary Fund were becoming worried about the U.S. practices. They had already seen the stable financial system of Iceland crippled after its deregulation, when greedy bankers borrowed billions of dollars to finance international deals. The amount of outstanding debt in the U.S. backed by poor securities was concerning to everyone but the U.S. who kept reassuring everyone that the market was still growing.

The bubble burst when industry and business could not afford to borrow money at the exorbitant interest rates they would have to pay to take money away from the lucrative housing loans. People were laid off, defaults on housing loans began to reach concerning levels. Many sub-prime mortgagees had been encouraged to borrow the full value of their house. By 2008,





with no equity in the house, the occupiers simply walked away. The houses could not be resold at the new inflated prices. Insurance companies covered the defaults then they, too, began to run out of money. The debt crisis snowballed out of control and we are still living with the aftermath today.

One by one the investment banks went under and were only saved by massive injections of Federal (that is, taxpayers) money.

The documentary gives the best and clearest description I have so far seen of the causes of the crisis. Names are named and some people are prepared to front the camera and state their case. Others simply refused to be interviewed for the film. In 2010 a Senate enquiry tried to get to the bottom of the matter. We watch senior executives of major companies wriggle and waffle through questions put to them by the Senate Inquiry. Responsibility to their customers seems to have been lost in the mass greed. They seem completely unashamed at the conflict of interest between their commercial or academic roles and their employment by the government as advisers, or the way they kept selling dodgy products knowing full well they were not as solid as the ratings suggested.

Some Senators seemed to sense what was coming and warned against the repeal of what little oversight there was. They were largely ignored. The Securities Exchange Commission, the body that regulated trading, had to have been aware of the growing problem but actively refused to do anything about it. Alan Greenspan, one-time head of the Federal Reserve and economic advisor to three Presidents, was blinded by his anti-regulation ideology to what was going on.

When Lehman Brothers finally failed and went

bankrupt the seriousness of the situation could no longer be hidden. Companies fell over like dominoes, crippling the U.S. economy. Firms like General Motors and Chrysler were on the verge of bankruptcy themselves as nobody could afford to buy their products. The ripples spread and the worldwide global recession began. Even in China recession began as the firms that exported to the U.S. couldn't sell their products. Staff layoffs began there as well. By early 2010 six million mortgages had been foreclosed in the U.S. . Evictees were living in tent cities.

So “Qui Bono”? (Who Benefits?). Greedy executives made huge bonuses. The top five executives at Lehmans made over a billion dollars in bonuses in the five years before the crash. Merrill Lynch paid bonuses of more than 3.6 million dollars from the bailout money after the firm failed. Greedy stockholders made huge dividends on their investments. Greedy academics made their money and prestige then bailed out to go back to their academic world. Credit rating firms made good money giving high ratings to highly doubtful debts. Successive Presidents made political capital out of the “booming financial economy”. The greedy companies were bailed out with public money that the U.S. can ill afford. And the academics still want further deregulation?

At the end of the film consumer advocate Robert Gnaizda lists organisations that he feels should be prosecuted for criminal fraud. When Barack Obama became President one of his promises was to reform the financial system and regulate it more effectively. The laws were eventually watered down by government members paid off by financial lobbies and are largely ineffective. As Gnaizda points out, “It’s a Wall Street government”. There are still economists who argue in favour of a no-intervention government policy. These people do not seem to live in the same world as the rest of us but many have political or academic influence and their opinions are taken seriously. There is no requirement on them to disclose any financial involvement so their conflict of interest is unnoticed. The Presidents of Harvard and Columbia Universities refused to be interviewed.

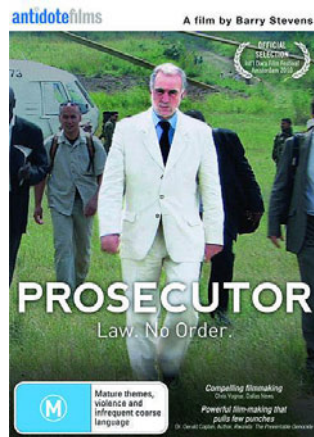
The documentary is at a loss to suggest what can now be done. Any remedy to the problem will be stopped in Congress by the financial lobby. So what’s to stop it happening again?



## Prosecutor Antidote Films R4

Luis Moreno-Ocampo is the Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Court, the U.N.-sponsored organization based in the Netherlands. His nominal job is to gain indictments against some of the world's leaders who indulge in what would be criminal murder or genocide. They will then be put on trial in front of the court. He has had his successes, notably with some of the leaders of the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia and the intertribal violence by armed militias in African countries.

He also has failures. An indictment has been prepared against President Al-Bashir of the Sudan for his troops' rape, murder and genocide on the people of Darfur. How do you arrest the President of a country? Al-Bashir retaliated by expelling much-needed aid groups from Darfur. It has been suggested that the prosecutor should also ask for an indictment against ex-President George W Bush for war crimes in Iraq, but the U.S.A. has not even signed up to ratify the ICC convention. Neither has China or Russia. Why would they sign up to an independent system that may lead to the arrest and charging of their own prominent citizens? A U.S. academic tries to excuse the non-participation of the U.S. by stressing that many of the crimes are made under political pressure. A U.S. newsman criticises the cost of the ICC and its notable lack of convictions so far. Neither argument is convincing.



As well as Al-Bashir, the documentary deals with the attempts to prosecute three African militia leaders such as Thomas Lubanga for crimes like conscripting young boys (some only ten years old) to fight in their armies in intertribal violence. Prosecution is difficult because if people appear as prosecution witnesses their family back home may be under threat. If you charge the militia leaders you must also charge the people who led retaliation raids. These are the people you need to arrest the leaders.

Moreno-Ocampo must be a diplomat as much as a prosecutor, as we see when he travels to Lubanga's home town. While there he must convince the people that genocide and conscripting of the youth will no longer be tolerated. He must confront Lubanga's mother and he becomes involved in the release of some young soldiers who were conscripted as kids.

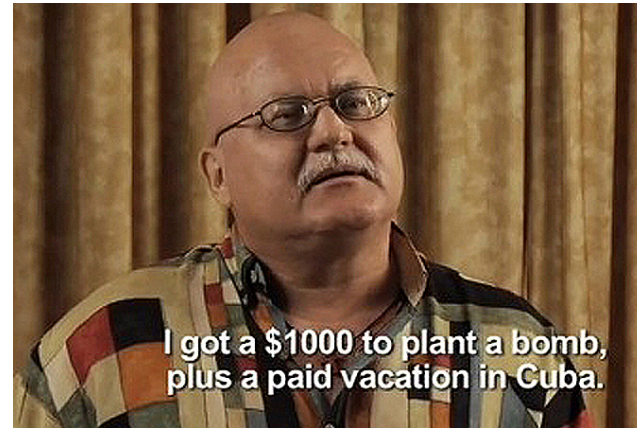
With these handicaps we must wonder sometimes if the ICC can ever be a practical court or just a dream. The ICC is in a difficult position. It must rely on signatory countries to perform the arrests as it has no police force of its own. Moreno-Ocampo believes the ICC must be made to work or we will see more Adolf Hitlers and Idi Amins appear in world history. Against him are the powerful countries concerned about the ICC, seeing it as a tool for instability and a threat to peace, whatever that peace may have cost in human terms.



**Will The Real Terrorist Please Stand Up**  
Cinema Libre  
R1 DVD

This fascinating documentary tries to explain the apparent hatred for Cuba in the U.S. today. It gives a detailed history of Cuba's progress from dictatorship to some sort of freedom under Castro. It covers successive U.S. governments' paranoia about Cuba, far more than can be explained by the usual "Communists on our doorstep" rationale. It lists the overt and covert actions against the new Cuba under Castro. They are not the actions of a friendly neighbour, but those of a terrorist host nation. The U.S. actions have understandably raised a lot of hostility against them, hostility now being repeated worldwide. Similar situations have been caused by the U.S. in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and soon, possibly, Venezuela. It is not possible to summarise in a couple of pages the wealth of information, interviews and archival footage in this documentary so a brief rundown of its content follows.

American investment was high in Cuba under the dictator Batista. The Mafia moved in to prosper from the hotels, casinos and brothels. Cuban people seemed to be going backwards under Batista. After Castro won the Revolution many American crime-syndicate-run businesses



were nationalised and the American and Cuban managers expelled. This gave the first wave of emigrants to Florida.

As Castro settled in there was much nationalisation of business and harassing of businessmen and professionals. This gave a second wave. Most of these voluntary exiles settled in Florida.

At this point Castro was more of a dictator than a Communist, but he appeared to be becoming a threat to the U.S. Eisenhower turned a blind eye to the Cuban exiles who bought WW2 bombers and bombed Havana. He authorised the CIA to invade Cuba and try to start another revolution, this time against Castro. The CIA equipped and trained dissatisfied Cuban exiles for the Bay of Pigs invasion. Cuban Intelligence was well aware of the coming conflict. The landing was a fiasco and Cuba finally broke off ties with America. The U.S put an embargo on Cuba, so Castro turned to Russia for supplies of oil. In this way he found himself classified as a Communist and therefore an enemy of the U.S.



The new U.S. president, Kennedy, denied responsibility or American involvement in the Bay of Pigs invasion but the truth quickly came out. The CIA was then instructed to kill Castro by any means possible. Diplomatic moves to reduce the rising tension failed. It again came to a head when the CIA learned that the Russians were installing missiles in Cuba. It was seen as an aggressive move – the idea that it may be for Cuba's defence from another U.S.-sponsored invasion wasn't aired by the non-critical me-



dia. U.S. warships started interdicting and searching Russian freighters on their way to Cuba. Another crisis, this time a nuclear war between the U.S and Russia, was averted when the two world powers reached agreement about removal of missiles from Cuba and Turkey. The CIA returned to its plans to assassinate Castro using exiled Cubans.

As the CIA withdrew much official support and as the Cuban exiles became increasingly marginalised they simply turned to crime instead, using their weapons, training and explosives so generously supplied by the CIA for the revolution. The remaining militant Cubans increasingly comprised the radicals and the peace advocates, and the militants started attacking the moderates with bombs. Some bombings were successful. Many exiles had lost touch with their original goal to assassinate Castro. Instead they turned to the current trendy action, hijacking or blowing up Cuban airliners. After the first aircraft was bombed it came out that the CIA knew of the bombing preparations but did not inform Cuban authorities. Action by the terrorists continued against current Cuban diplomats and businessmen in the U.S.

In Cuba, meanwhile, Castro was gradually improving the lot of his people. He was training teachers, doctors and all the other professionals



Luis Posada Carriles  
Miami

needed in a modern society. Much of this training had to be done in Russia. He broke up many of the big landholdings into smaller farms for the poor rural workers.

Following Ronald Reagan's election to President the militants tried a new tack. They got their own representatives elected to the government. This gave them a certain legitimacy and official contact with organisations within the government..

Meanwhile in Cuba the economic situation was going bad. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the Cuban economy collapsed completely. A new wave of exiles arrived in the U.S.. Many were economic refugees, but five of them were Cuban Intelligence agents tasked to penetrate the violent exile groups in the U.S. The U.S. finally refused entry to these would-be

immigrants and started returning them to Cuba. The humanitarian groups like Brothers To The Rescue who had been helping the refugees was confined to overflying Cuba and dropping leaflets, finally prompting a complaint to the U.S. from Cuba. The U.S. promised it would take the licences of the pilots concerned, but the flights continued. Finally the Cubans shot down two of the aircraft.

This incensed President Clinton, who now found he only had two options left – invade





was intimidated into finding them guilty on flimsy evidence. Yet, realistically, all the Cubans were doing was trying to prevent the U.S. from carrying out further terrorist actions against their country. It wasn't until 2011 that Carriles was finally charged.

Now the U.S has to live with its support of terrorism against Cuba, just as it suffers from its support of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Most

Cuba again or tighten the embargo. He had to opt for the latter. In a carefully-planned media campaign he attempted to cut one of Cuba's main sources of income, tourism, by announcing that Cuba was now dangerous and everything in Cuba should be regarded as a target. A number of bomb explosions in Havana hotels seemed to support this danger, whether by violent exiles or by exiles employed by the CIA..

Posada Carriles, an exile, admitted responsibility for one bomb and a bomber captured in Cuba identified Carriles as the man who enlisted him to plant another bomb. The U.S. did nothing, but imprisoned the five Cuban Intelligence agents for espionage. They were also blamed for passing intelligence that led to the shooting down of the Brothers To The Rescue planes although the time of the flights was public knowledge. There are accusations that the jury

Cuban immigrants just want to get on with their lives but there are still people who publicly urge Castro's assassination. As well as the remaining exiles the "cause" is supported by ethnic radio presenters who spread their poison into younger minds. The brainwashing of the U.S. public has been so thorough it will take generations to die out. So just who are the terrorists? The Cubans, who have never invaded the U.S. and want to stay independent of it? The U.S. government which makes a habit of invading other countries? The Cuban exiles still longing for an out of date lifestyle and willing to use violence to get it? The CIA who pays others to do its dirty work?

There are so many parallels in the world today that it is obvious that the U.S. has not learned a thing from Cuba. It makes a joke of "the war on terror".

The documentary has no discernable bias and many verifiable facts so I tend to accept its story.





**Stormriders**  
Chinese fantasy /  
kungfu  
Pinnacle Films  
R4 DVD

*Chinese, subtitles  
English*



First, a warning. This film is supposedly a prequel to the popular Storm Warriors film of 1998. It duplicates much of the earlier film and is probably better described as a remake. That's a remake of an earlier film based on an animated series based on a comic book series. With a pedigree like that, what could go wrong?

The film covers a long time span so you must watch closely to follow the plot. Briefly, Lord Conquer is a martial arts teacher with a maniacal laugh who wants to be top in the martial arts world. He steals two boys with special powers as trainees, Whispering Wind and Striding Cloud, and starts training them. Their strength increases and so does Conquer's clan. The two boys have forgotten their parents and think of Conquer as the man who raised them. They live as brothers.

A prophet known as Mud Buddha tells Conquer that he will have ten good years when he will be invincible, then will find out his ultimate destiny. After the ten years are up, he finds the second half of the prophecy is that Wind and Cloud have the power to make or break him, but only their combined powers can beat him. He prom-

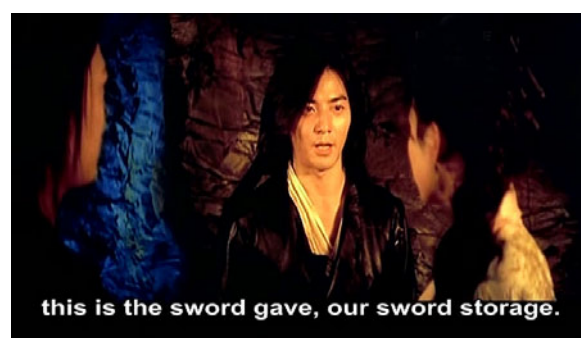


ises his daughter Charity to Wind in marriage, but Cloud also loves her and the two part company. They only reunite after Conquer accidentally kills Charity and they take their revenge on him.

The film keeps the comic-book look very well. There is lots of improbable posturing and posing with weapons, leaping through the air, silly hats, mystical creatures and so on. This is where it becomes easy to lose the plot as new characters are introduced and old ones reappear.

If the plot is confused, the translation and subtitles are ludicrous – "to be so clam in the face of danger....". The typing leaves a lot to be desired, with the typist leaving a space after every "Y" and having no upper case at all. It does at least inject some moments of humour into the film. The CGI is amazing and the fight scenes are spectacular, as you would expect.

I haven't seen the earlier film but the new version stands well on its own. Even with its occasional weaknesses and dodgy subtitles it is well worth watching if you are a martial arts or Chinese fantasy fan.



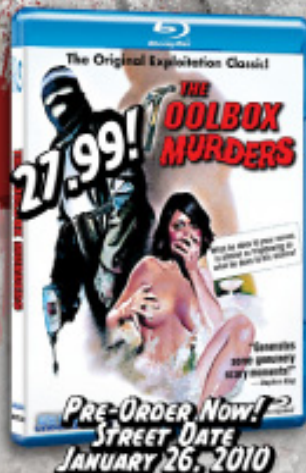
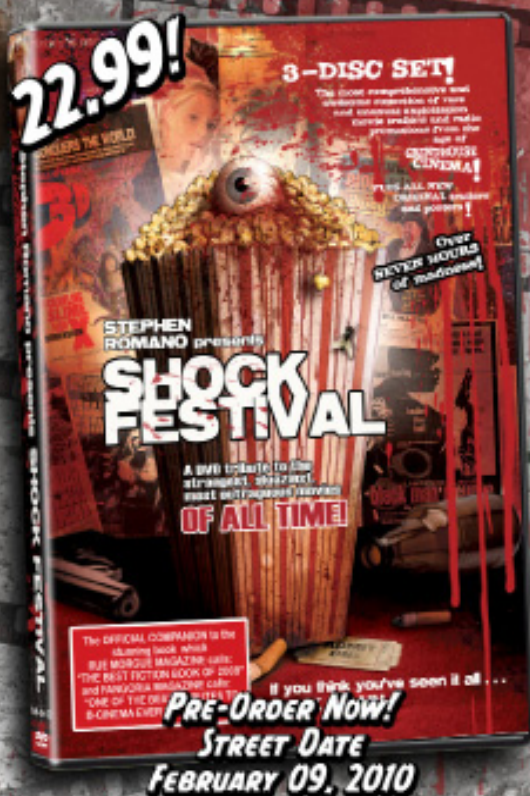


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